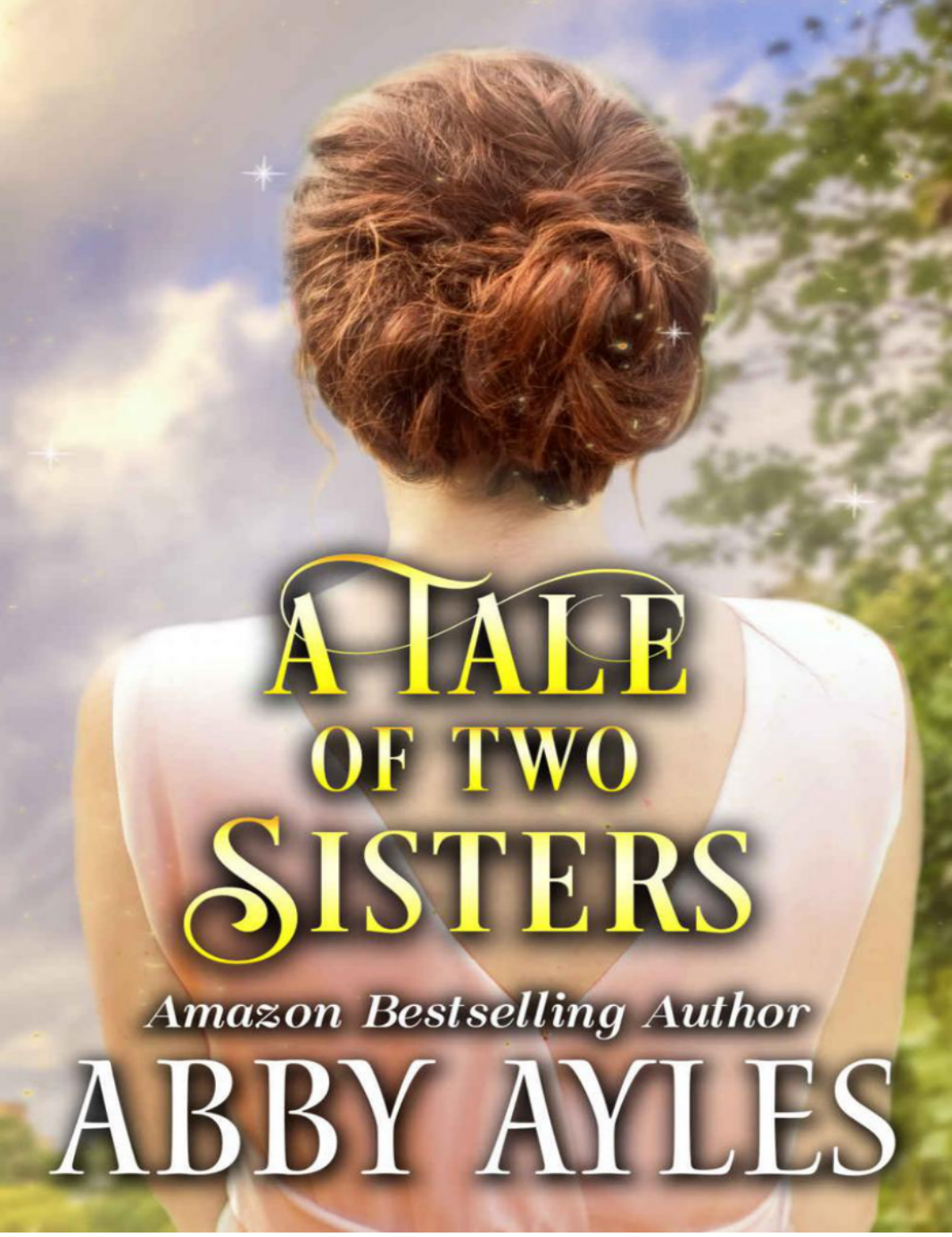

A TALE
OF TWO
SISTERS
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A Tale of two Sisters

Chapter 1

Constance

London, 1812.

Constance held up the long pale blue dress to her body, noting how well it would fit, and did a quick spin in the mirror, watching as the blue silk rippled around her. It was a beautiful dress indeed, made especially for Lady Rosedale's ball. Constance could barely contain her excitement, constantly fidgeting and wandering back-and-forth in her preparations for the event.

She did not often attend such events, and it was not for lack of invitations. Her father, Mr. Archibald Henderson, may not hold a title, but his extreme wealth meant they always topped of the invitation lists for the season. No, the real reason Constance did not attend many such events was her older sister, Viola.

But Viola had so far not expressed any concerns over the ball that evening, and Constance was delighted. She was to wear her finest dress, have her hair fixed in the latest fashionable updo, and she would dance the evening away.

“You will look beautiful, Miss Constance,” the maid’s soft voice came from across the room.

“You are too kind, Lily,” Constance brushed off the compliment quickly. She never wanted to appear proud, but at Lily’s words, she lifted her eyes from the dress in the mirror to her face. She knew she was not without a certain charm. Of a tall figure, she had bright hazel eyes, and her auburn hair had the habit of shining in the sunlight.

She turned away from her reflection, rushing across the room to Lily.

“Come, help me dress,” she pleaded kindly. “Oh, I do not think I will sit still in the carriage!” Her words prompted Lily to giggle.

“You do seem rather excited, Miss,” Lily said as she helped Constance step into the dress. The blue silk slid past the chemise and stays easily, before being buttoned in place around her back. Lily was still trying to straighten out the skirt when Constance ran back to the mirror, twirling in front of it once again to admire the garment.

Cinched high on her waist, just under her bust, the light-blue silk flowed delicately to the floor. Around the hem, the material was embroidered with small pearls and beads, forming a pattern of swirls that was matched on her small-capped sleeves. The neckline was deep, showing off the length of her neck. Constance smiled to herself, delighted with the dress.

This evening is to be a grand one indeed!

As if in answer to her thought, the door suddenly burst open. Constance flicked her head round to see who had entered, nearly knocking Lily's hand away as the maid passed her some pearl earrings to wear.

Viola was standing a few steps in from the door, her breath so erratic that Constance immediately stepped away from Lily, her excitement replaced by sudden and strong concern.

The two sisters were extremely similar in appearance apart from one stark difference. Often enough, they had been presumed twins in the past, but Viola was actually the elder by two years. Constance

watched as Viola's hazel eyes darted to and fro, her delicate features were pursed together, and seeing Lily watching the two of them, she hung her head forward, allowing a few dark red curls that had been left down from her updo hide her face.

It also masked the feature that differentiated the two of them so strongly: Viola's scar. The mark was a slash across Viola's cheek, a sharp white line that had been earned in a carriage accident many years ago.

"Viola? What is wrong?" Constance moved to her side and reached for her hands. Viola did not reply straight away. This was a habit of hers, staying quiet when there were people nearby that she did not trust.

Constance knew her sister well and loved her dearly. Viola's quiet and often nervous nature meant that Constance was the bolder one, despite the fact she was the younger sister.

"Lily." She turned calmly to her maid and offered a sweet smile. "Could you give us a moment alone, please?"

“Of course, Miss.” Lily dropped a curtsy and hurried from the room, no doubt used to being dismissed when Viola had worked herself into a state. As the door closed, Constance squeezed Viola’s hands, wishing she could convey with that simple action all the comfort in the world.

“Now that we are alone,” Constance said good-naturedly, “do tell me what is wrong.”

“I do not think I can do this.” Viola looked up. Being a little shorter than Constance, she had to turn her chin up, forcing the auburn curls away from her face and revealing the sharp white scar again. Constance felt her chest twinge with worry as a tear slipped out of Viola’s eyes.

“Oh, Viola.” Constance entwined their fingers together, seeing the pain in her sister’s face. “It is only a ball.”

“Only a ball? It is a *ball*, Constance!” Viola spoke with vigor as more tears slipped down her cheeks. She disentangled one of her

hands from Constance and went to dry her tears with the back of her hand. “Think of all the people that will be there.”

Constance winced, knowing how hard such a thought was for her sister. The ton were an unforgivable lot, and any gossip spread quickly. Though the sisters had attended a few events over the last year, they usually steered away from such busy events as balls.

All because of Viola’s scar. She knew how people whispered about her for it, and Constance could not even argue it was all in her imagination, for she had witnessed such whispers herself. It was not unusual for people to stare, too.

“I’ll be the talk of the ball for all the wrong reasons,” Viola complained, turning away and trying to dry more of her tears.

“Do not say that—”

“It’s true!” Viola’s tears were growing worse. “They stare at me. As though I’m one of those weird animals they find in the menagerie at the Tower of London.”

“You do have a wonderful way with words, sister.” Constance smiled in spite of the moment. It was something she loved about Viola, the secret wit she had, but she kept such a talent usually hidden, her nervous nature winning out. “Now, look.” Constance took charge, snatching a handkerchief from her dresser and turning to dry the tears on Viola’s cheeks. “It is not as bad as you think.”

“Constance, I love you, but you do not see it the same as I do,” Viola complained gently, though she allowed Constance to dry her tears.

“I know.” Constance sighed, feeling her stomach twist tighter into knots at the truth of the statement. Everything she had witnessed in her sister’s treatment had to be far worse for Viola to endure. Constance smiled as she finished drying the tears that crossed Viola’s cheeks. “There, all better, pretty as a picture.” They had exchanged this phrase throughout their lives. They both usually found comfort in it, but on this occasion, Constance could see Viola’s attempt at a smile did not quite reach her eyes.

Constance had to protect Viola. It was what she did, how she lived her life. She couldn't help the disappointment that swelled within her chest at her decision to help Viola that night, but it had to be done. She would go to the ends of the world to protect her sister from pain, and letting go of her excitement in attending the ball was a small price to pay. Still, she cast one despondent look down at the beautiful blue dress she was wearing before she told Viola of her resolution.

"Come here, now, there is no need to worry." She opened her arms, and Viola fell into them. The two sisters embraced for a minute. "If you do not want to go, then I will not go either."

Viola pulled back enough in the embrace to connect their gazes, her hazel eyes wide in surprise.

"You would do that?" Viola asked.

"Of course. I will not leave you," Constance promised, earning for the first time that evening a genuine smile from her sister.

“How do you expect to accomplish such a feat?” Viola frowned again. “You know the way our parents have talked of this evening. Mother is so keen on introducing you to every available suitor that I rather think she would carry you there herself if you refused, tossed over her shoulder.”

Constance laughed warmly at the image, once again delighted by her sister’s wit.

“Mother can be rather determined in her way.” She calmed her laughter. “Do not worry, for I have a plan.”

“A plan?” Viola repeated, her thin lips tilting up into a small smile. “You have me intrigued.”

“Trust me, for it is a very good plan indeed.” Constance matched her smile.

“Thank you.” Viola smiled sadly now. “Mother might still make you go tonight.”

“No need to thank me, and she certainly will not make me go. I’m not leaving you sitting at home alone all night. I promise.” Constance enveloped her sister into another embrace, pulling her tight.

Over her shoulder though, Constance’s smile faltered slightly. It was true; she loved her sister and would do anything to help her avoid the embarrassment the gossip could cause, but she couldn’t help being disappointed.

Oh well, the dress will have to be given an outing another day.

An hour later, Constance and Viola were walking down the stairs toward the entrance hall where their father paced agitatedly, waiting for their arrival.

“Are we to be late again?” he called up the stairs. “It seems to always be the fate of this family.”

Constance made a point of dallying further on the stairs, her arm looped with Viola’s as they walked down. Their footsteps alerted their

father to their presence, and Archibald looked toward them. His eyebrows shot up, nearly reaching his dark red hairline as he saw the two of them.

"Ah—what a sight you two are to behold. Quite stunning." He smiled.

"Thank you, Father." Constance returned the smile as they reached the bottom step. She and Viola had discussed her plan in detail, but it couldn't be executed yet, not until their mother made an appearance.

"Ah, there you two are," Jane's voice answered her thought. Moments later, their mother appeared through the doorway of the sitting room, pulling her cream pelisse around her shoulders and tightening the laces that fastened it together across her chest. "Oh, Constance, what a beautiful dress that is!" Jane hurried to her side and began to flatten out creases in the skirt that may have appeared during the short walk down the stairs.

At the compliment, Constance felt Viola's arm stiffen within hers,

and knew what pain the simple words must cause. Their mother seemed to have a habit for such unintentional neglect of Viola. By complimenting Constance alone, it was as though she was announcing Viola could not match her in appearance.

"Thank you, Mother." Constance felt her smile was a little more forced this time. "What of Viola's dress? I think the modiste did an excellent–"

"Yes, of course," Jane said quickly, though her eyes passed over Viola a tad too fast. Constance could feel Viola's arm stiffen even more. Unable to bear it, Constance decided the time had come to put her plan into action.

"It is rather hot this evening, isn't it?" She addressed her comment toward Viola, who looked bewildered.

"Actually, I'm rather cold." Viola frowned.

"Oh, how strange." Constance then affected a small wobble on her feet as she stepped off the bottom step.

“Constance, are you well, my dear?” Jane was suddenly at her side.

“Yes, I . . .” She faltered then completed her act, closing her eyes and performing a perfect swoon.

“Constance!” Yelps of concern sprung up.

Constance half fell to the floor with Viola helping her down part of the way, ensuring she did not hit her head on the stairs. For a moment, Archibald and Jane fussed around her, ordering the servants to fetch brandy and smelling salts immediately.

If they thought Constance ill, Jane would never insist on the family attending the ball. The plan worked perfectly as they discussed moving Constance back to her bed where she could recover.

Once she was sure her parents were looking elsewhere, Constance opened her eyes, so only Viola could see her, and offered a small wink. Viola hid her laugh, before ushering her to close her eyes

again.

There you are, Viola. You are safe from the ton tonight.

Viola

Viola was engrossed in her watercolor painting the next day. It was what she really loved, escaping the woes of the world by thinking only of the work of the paintbrush and the landscapes that she created. She sat back in her chair for a moment, admiring the vista she had built before her. It was from a memory, a visit she and her family had made once to the Wiltshire plains, with a white chalk horse set upon one of the sweeping hills.

In most of her paintings, Viola added a small figure, somewhere in the distance of the landscape, to give the painting some scale. Secretly, though, she placed the figure in these paintings as she wished she could place herself in such a location. Within moments, a few flicks of the brush, she could imagine she had transported her body to a place of such tranquil beauty. She leaned forward and added the figure, this time stood by the white chalk horse that was riding across the hill. The figure, though she had her back turned, had dark

auburn hair like herself.

“Well, what a to-do!” Jane’s sudden cry tore Viola from her moment of peace. She leaned back in the chair once more and looked around the room, reminding herself that she was still in London.

Jane was sitting at the far end of the room with a scandal sheet clutched in her active hands. She had chosen the seat nearest to Constance, who sat at the pianoforte, practicing a Haydn piece.

“What is wrong, Mother?” Constance asked, though she did not turn her eyes away from the sheet music as she continued to play.

“Remember Baron Gerresborough’s son? Mr. Thomas Bennett?” Jane said quickly, waving the sheet of paper in the air animatedly, trying to earn Constance’s gaze. “You met once at an assembly.”

“Yes, vaguely,” Constance agreed.

Viola turned in her seat to completely face her mother. She remembered Mr. Thomas Bennett very well indeed, though she had

only met him once. Tall, with black hair and sharp blue eyes, he was the most handsome man she had ever seen, and she could not deny that the mere thought of him had lingered for a long time.

"It says here," Jane continued, "that he was seen at Lady Rosedale's ball last night. There are whispers, and I quote directly here, '*that the once ill-reputed rake, and positive rogue of London's Ton, may have once and for all turned his back on his wayward life. It seems Mr. Bennett may be in search of a wife and a life that is, no doubt, much more approved of by his father, the Baron.*' Well, what do you say to that?"

"Do rakes ever truly change their ways?" Viola piped up. "I'm sure I heard a phrase once of leopards rarely changing their spots." Viola was pleased to see Constance laughing at her jest, though Jane merely rolled her eyes in response.

"Many men change when it comes to marriage, Viola," Jane warned softly. Viola couldn't help sitting straighter in her chair. The idea of Mr. Bennett, that handsome blue-eyed man, searching for a wife made her fidget in her seat.

A man like him would surely never look at me.

She cast her eyes down again, allowing the auburn curls to cover her face and the scar across her cheek.

“Speaking of marriage.” Jane turned her attention back to Constance, with a smile now in place. “It is high time we found you a suitor, Constance.”

Viola tried to return her attention to her painting, but she was struggling now. Her mother never said such things to her, despite the fact she was the older one and should marry before Constance. She rather thought Constance was her mother’s favorite, as Jane never seemed to show as much love or adoration for Viola.

“Countess of Dalfern’s dinner party is in three days, and we must take you to more events,” Jane was still talking to Constance. “I hope your malady from last night has calmed itself now, my dear?”

Viola looked up from her painting, connecting her gaze with

Constance's across the room. Avoiding two events in one week would be too much for Viola to hope for.

"Yes, I feel much better today, Mother," Constance assured, turning her gaze back down to the piano.

"Excellent! With a little luck, we'll have you courting within the month!" Jane laughed happily as she turned the scandal sheet and continued to read.

Viola lowered her paintbrush, her interest in the picture suddenly lost. When listening to such conversations, it was impossible not to realize how much Jane preferred Constance.

Viola turned her head, catching a brief murky reflection of herself in the mirror. The scar was barely visible in that reflection, but she knew it was there. Every time her mother looked at her, she must have been aware of it. Why else would she discard Viola so easily in such conversations?

Constance is her favorite, and who could blame her for it . . .

Chapter 2

Viola

Viola sat at her vanity table staring at her reflection with the same disappointment she usually harbored. The dress she wore was a pristine cream, bordered with lace. Unlike Constance's dresses, hers were much simpler in design and did not have the same beading or elaborate embroidery. In truth, Viola had no care for the dress she wore. She preferred garments that were bolder in color, and on her last visit to the modiste, she had picked up such a bold green material, tempted to step outside of the boundaries to which she usually kept herself, but Jane had appeared at her shoulder, warning her against such a choice.

"Best opt for something a little simpler, my dear," Jane had said with a soft smile. "It will suit you better." She had pulled at one of her red curls and drawn it across Viola's cheek then, hiding the scar, before hurrying off to join Constance's side. Jane did not need to spell out her thoughts for Viola to understand her meaning. She clearly thought it best that Viola did not draw attention to herself at all.

Viola now tweaked the material of the cream dress, saddened by

both the plain color and her mother's inferences. She lifted her eyes again to the mirror, letting her gaze rest on the scar that marred her face. The thick white slash was so bold that it was the first thing anyone saw when they looked at her. She felt her insides twist at the sight of it.

I might as well be an attraction at the travelling circus.

She had heard of the circuses that toured the country and had seen posters for them; they advertised such attractions as people with disfigurements. She rather thought she would have belonged in such a place much more than at a dinner party for the ton. The last event she had attended, she had spent many minutes staring around the room, comparing the beautiful women there to the Grecian marble statues she could see at the museum, each one immaculate, complete perfection.

She picked up her white powder off the table and dabbed it over the scar, trying to hide it, but it was an impossible task. It merely softened the hard ridge a little. A tear slipped out of Viola's eye, and she hurried to dab it dry with the powder, before blinking madly. She

had shed many tears in the last nine years since she had earned the scar. These days, she was tired of that, desperate to have a life that was not defined by it, but that dream seemed but a futile hope. A life that was far beyond her reach.

"Viola?" Constance's voice echoed through the corridors beyond the chamber door.

Viola checked that there were no signs of her crying before the door opened and Constance appeared, her cheeks flushed pink with excitement.

"Are you ready?" Constance asked, her smile great indeed. "I think our poor mother will give herself angina from the sheer amount of fretting she does that we're always late."

"Yes, I'm ready." Viola felt a twinge of guilt as she hurried to her feet. She would have to be blind not to see the excitement Constance had for such events, and she felt bad for having kept her younger sister away from so many.

As Viola's eyes settled on her sister, that guilt morphed into something else entirely. Constance was exceptionally beautiful indeed, her flawless skin unmarred by anything as abhorrent as the scar Viola carried. For years, Viola had been jealous of Constance's beauty and her resulting confidence.

Whereas Viola had descended into nerves and quietude over the years, Constance was confident, bold, and entertaining. However, it was not jealousy that upset Viola so much on this occasion. It was what Constance was wearing around her neck.

Constance was dressed in the stunning pale blue garment she had intended to wear for the ball a few days before, and to match that dress, their mother had given Constance her sapphire necklace. It stood proudly on Constance's delicate collarbone, bordered with swirls of silver, the sapphire carved into a perfect heart.

"Mother's sapphire?" Viola could not stop the surprised words, though she tried to affect a smile.

"Oh, yes." Constance placed a hand on the necklace. "Mother

insisted I wear it tonight. Was that not kind of her?"

"Very kind indeed," Viola agreed. She had never been permitted to wear such things, least of all such a prized family heirloom. "Pretty as a picture," she said the usual phrase they exchanged, causing Constance to smile once more.

"Is all well, Viola?" Constance's smile faltered slightly, urging Viola to try harder in her façade.

"Yes, of course, let's go. Before our poor mother really does suffer some angina." She looped her arm through her sister's and together they hurried out of the room.

The dinner party was to be a smaller affair than the ball, so Viola was not as concerned. Yet now, if she could have thought of a way to avoid the party, she would have done so.

Standing beside her younger sister's stunning, unblemished beauty all night would be difficult enough to bear, but standing beside her with such a visible demonstration of their mother's love caused

such anguish that Viola had to force herself to keep moving forward.

Tonight shall be an insufferable evening indeed.

As the carriage stopped at Dalfern Manor, Viola was the first to step out, taking the footman's hand quickly in her eagerness to be free from the tight confines of the phaeton.

For the whole journey, Jane had not stopped prattling on about her hopes for Constance that evening. Viola had been tempted to cover her ears, a physical demonstration of how tired she was of listening to Jane's constant praise of her sister.

"Oh, I'm quite sure, my dear," Jane was still babbling as she descended the carriage behind Viola. "Your dance card will be full for the entire evening! Mark my words."

"Mother, you must be a little quieter," Constance pleaded as she joined Viola and linked their arms together. "You will embarrass Viola and I if all the guests of the dinner party have to listen to your praises."

Archibald stepped out of the carriage last and managed to catch Viola's gaze. His expression softened, as though communicating silently that he was sorry for Jane's whitter. No words passed between the two of them though, leaving Viola feeling more frustrated that she had to attend the evening at all.

"Nonsense." Jane laughed as she led the way to the manor house. "Why should I not praise my beautiful daughter? Come, we're late already! We must give suitors their chance to ask for your dance card before the first set begins."

Viola felt her stomach sink, quite certain that while Constance's card would be full, hers would remain empty. Viola was aware of Constance looking at her, mouth open as though she wished to say something, but before any sound could pass her lips, the door to the manor opened and the butler ushered them inside, quickly taking their pelisses from them and escorting them toward the great hall.

As they stepped through the doorway, their names were announced by the footman, and Countess of Dalfern quickly stepped

forward to greet them. As the Countess talked with Jane and Archibald, Viola allowed her gaze to wander around the room.

It was busy, with many more people attending than she had expected. Their eyes danced across her and Constance, with some hands even rising to point the two of them out to their friends. Viola involuntarily stepped back, a gut reaction to being faced with so many people looking her way. To her surprise, Constance held her arm close to her own, refusing to let her retreat.

“Viola,” Constance whispered, for her ears only, “please do not be worried. Everyone is here to have a good time. I give you my word, nothing bad will happen.”

Viola said nothing in reply, her sudden nerves so great that she had to clench her hands together to stop her fingers from trembling. She knew Constance was right. She was well aware it was not as though anyone there would insult her to her face; it was more the fact that those in the ton made their fun by gossiping of others, and she was a favored target of such gossip.

Countess of Dalfern moved toward the two of them, welcoming them to the party.

“It is so lovely to see you both here.” She smiled sweetly, her face crinkling. “Oh, Miss Constance, what a beautiful necklace! Is that your mother’s sapphire I see?”

“Yes,” Jane replied before Constance could. “Doesn’t it suit her well? I let her borrow it for the occasion.”

“How sweet. It is a beautiful dress too. I have no doubt, Miss Constance, that you’ll be quite the gem of the season.” The Countess turned her attention to Viola. “It is lovely to see you as well, Miss Viola.”

“And you, my lady.” Viola bobbed a curtsy, feeling the customary slight she was now accustomed to. Everyone paid Constance compliments, but not one was ever spared for her.

“Well, enjoy the party!” the Countess declared and turned away to welcome others to the hall.

“Follow me.” Constance led Viola across the room before she really knew what was happening. “If I have to suffer their attentions much longer, I feel I shall burst with anger!”

Such an outburst took Viola by surprise, but she bit her lip, refusing to give an answer. It shocked her that Constance could be suffering equal anger when she was the center of all their praise.

What I would give for just one compliment . . .

As they crossed the room, many faces turned to watch them, though Viola was not sure whether they were admiring Constance’s beauty or taking a look at the scarred sister.

Once they reached the punch table, Viola found her arm finally released as Constance poured them two glasses. The position brought them close to a group of ladies who were prattling amongst themselves. Viola was relieved to hear that she was not the subject of their gossip.

“Oh yes, Mr. Thomas Bennett, you heard me right. He has been invited this very evening along with the Baron, his father. What entertainment that shall be!” One of the ladies giggled. “Do you think this talk of the man finally settling down could hold any truth?”

“Why ever not?” a second lady said. “He will be quite a desirable suitor! Only a barony to inherit, but a gentleman as handsome as he will not be a bachelor for long once he decides to wed.”

Viola felt a tug on her lips at the mention of the blue-eyed gentleman she had thought of so much. Perhaps there was hope. She found herself standing a little straighter, thinking of the man and anticipating his arrival at the party.

She was tired of her life as it was; was there any harm in wanting another? Was there harm in wishing perhaps she could be the young lady Mr. Bennett set his sights upon?

Perhaps this is something that can be mine, rather than Constance’s. My own piece of happiness in this world.

She rather liked that idea. The door to the great hall opened, and she flicked her head toward it, flooded with excitement at the idea of seeing Mr. Bennett again . . .

Chapter 3

Thomas

Thomas shifted uncomfortably in the carriage as he faced his mother and father.

“Mother, I could have taken my own carriage,” Thomas said gently. Being escorted by his parents left him with more than just a bit of frustration. He had his own carriage, and being escorted reminded him of his younger days, before he had received the reputation of being a rake and rogue.

“I know you could have,” Baroness Alison Gerresborough said, widening her eyes in a soft reprimand. “In case it has slipped your notice, Thomas, your behavior over the last few years has not only marred your own reputation.”

“Surely we do not have to discuss this again,” Thomas pleaded.

“Then you know why I’m insisting that we escort you to the party,” Alison spoke with triumph. “Appearing as a family, together with your father and I, is a good way to begin to mend your good

name. Not to mention ours too."

"*Good name*," the Baron repeated with a smile. "Alison, he is hardly the first young man who had to crawl back from a poor reputation."

"You should not be so forgiving!" Alison rounded on him, her eyes fiery.

"You forgave me my past, I seem to remember, when you married me." The Baron's mischief only made Alison shift more in her seat.

Thomas laughed warmly at his father's words. He had taken much after his father, both in appearance and in behavior. These days, the Baron's hair was turning grey with age, no longer the deep black like his son's, but his blue eyes were still alight with energy.

"That is quite different!" Alison said pointedly. "Thomas is our son, and I do not like to think of his name being dragged through the mud so."

“It will recover soon enough, do not worry,” the Baron waved off the idea again.

“That is beside the point. We must do what we can to repair his name. By arriving with us, Thomas,” she said, turning her attention back to him, “you will not give anyone the chance to think that you’ll be leaving tonight with anyone but us.”

“I had no intention of leaving with anyone but you two, Mother,” he assured, with strength and a genuine honesty to his voice.

He had spent many years jumping from one bed to the next. It’s what he did. Not that he loved that life . . . it was more out of necessity, a great need for distraction.

He turned his head to look out of the carriage window, his mind involuntarily drawing back to the moment that had set him on such a rakish path. He had been in love once. Lady Juliana, a beauty like no other, who had strung him along in his youth, led him to believing she loved him back. The day she spurned him still hurt. She had said in no

uncertain terms that she loved another, and that she had merely kept him around for her own amusement.

The fact that he could be such a plaything, toyed with at the whim of another, left him scarred. Soon, he found himself visiting gentlemen's clubs, including those that were not so well reputed. The ladies that visited such places became his frequent companions. Over the last few years, he had toyed with many women the way his own heart had been played with. He had shared his bed with opera singers, actresses, dancers, widows, and even some well-respected ladies of the ton that were no longer so virtuous, thanks to him.

Yet, with age had come a stark realization. He had become the very thing he hated. No longer did the distraction of a woman in his bed ease the pain Lady Juliana had caused. No, if he wished to find happiness in his life, he had to change it himself.

That was when he had gone to his father and told him of his wish to reform. The Baron had been happy indeed, and never as condescending as his mother was, as he had hardly been a saint in his own youth.

The scandal sheets had somehow cottoned on to this new stage in Thomas' life, though he did not know how they knew. Such papers had covered in detail the roguish ways of his past life, and now they seemed to be documenting his decision to find a wife and prepare himself for the Barony.

"So, I must ask," the Baron said, still holding his smile. "As we expect you to bring a young lady home soon, is there anyone in particular you have in mind?"

"No." Thomas shook his head. Though he had attended some events of the season the year before, he had not spent long at them, preferring the company of ladies from Covent Garden.

"What of Miss Winter? She is delightful, and her dowry–" His mother sat forward in her seat with sudden eagerness.

"I will not be pushed in any direction," Thomas said plainly, watching as his mother sat back in her seat again, her hope a little deflated.

“Well said,” his father agreed.

“I am only trying to help,” Alison continued.

“Alison.” The Baron turned to her again. “If I had followed the recommendation of my mother in my courtship, I would have married a woman I did not care for at all, probably never have brought myself to produce an heir with her . . . and I would have spent my years very unhappy. Instead, I married you.” At these words, he offered a smile to his wife, and her face lit up. “And I have been very happy indeed.”

Thomas saw the love between them and longed to experience such a feeling himself.

“How did you know, Father?” he asked suddenly, earning a look of surprise. “How did you know Mother was the one for you?”

“When you know, you know, my boy,” the Baron replied, shrugging. “Any woman that came before suddenly pales in comparison, and you know that any woman that came after her could

not match her merits." At these words, Alison rested her head on the Baron's shoulder and the two of them sat together in peace for a moment.

Damn lucky man, Thomas thought to himself as he stared at his father. If only he could meet a woman that would make the memory of Lady Juliana pale.

As Thomas entered the ballroom, all eyes seemed to turn in his direction. So much so that he was tempted to turn around and walk straight back out again. As though knowing his thoughts, he felt his father clap him on the back and usher him forward.

"No need to be scared of them," the Baron whispered.

"Easily said when you're not the one they're all staring at," Thomas muttered back.

"Ah, they're staring because they're all thinking about how to set up their daughters as your future wife," the Baron teased, but Thomas

was not so sure.

His eyes danced between the faces of other gentlemen his age, and he did not miss the disdain there. They clearly did not appreciate a rake amongst them.

“What do you think they’re all thinking?” Alison asked as she looped her arm with Thomas’.

“I shudder to think.” Thomas shook his head. “Probably cursing my name and hoping it will be slandered in the scandal sheets tomorrow.”

“That would not be a new occurrence,” the Baron teased once more, earning dark looks from both Thomas and Alison this time.

“Behave, George,” Alison warned, but the Baron just smiled in return, appearing innocent for a minute.

Thomas could well imagine the words in the scandal sheets: *Mr. Thomas Bennett has taken yet another step in trying to clean up the act of*

his roguish days, stepping out at Countess of Dalfern's dinner party, but it leaves this writer with a burning question . . . how serious is the Baron-to-be about turning over this new leaf? Or once he marries, and secures a dowry, will he return to his behavior of old?

He would throw such a scandal sheet into the fire, just as he had done with every other such paper that had crossed his lap in the previous months.

"I think I need a drink," Thomas said, extricating his arm from his mother's.

"Take it easy," Alison warned, and Thomas felt compelled to smile with reassurance.

"I said '*a drink*', Mother. Not a dozen." He was relieved to see her returning the smile before he hurried away. He kept his gaze down, away from every face he passed as he crossed the room, determined not to be drawn into conversation with strangers before having a glass in his hand.

He had just served himself a punch, sipping as the fruity and syrupy taste sated some of his need, when a clap to his arm surprised him.

“Well, well, if my eyes don’t deceive me.” The familiar voice made Thomas look up from his punch, startled. “Thomas!”

“Antony!” Thomas said, full of surprise as he held out his hand to shake. Since studying at Eton together, Antony, the Marquess of Salisbury, had been a good friend to Thomas. He had known no other man for as long or as well. He was also the only one who knew of Lady Juliana and the heartbreak Thomas had gone through all those years ago. “I don’t believe it,” Thomas said quickly. “I thought you were travelling in the Far East?”

“That I was, only returned this last week. A year is a long time to be away.” Antony shook his head, making his tousled dark brown hair dance across his forehead. His equally dark eyes moved to the punch bowl. “And it was hot work indeed, so you best pour me some punch to quench my thirst.”

“Here, take this.” Thomas passed him another punch glass, noting how tanned Antony was from his time abroad. “Gosh, am I glad you’re here.” Thomas sighed, the honesty clear in his voice.

“Ah, why is that?” Antony asked, drawing him to the side of the room, away from the main hustle and bustle. “From what I read in the scandal sheets this week, you are searching for a wife.”

“Those damn papers.” Thomas shook his head, hissing under his breath in anger. “Why do they stick their noses into my life so?”

“In case you haven’t noticed, old friend,” Antony said, gesturing at the room around them, “quite a lot of people here are bored. They do not travel like I do, they do not train for the Barony as you do, so they must occupy their time with something, and gossip is certainly an entertaining way to distract themselves from boredom.”

“Oh, I have missed your candor,” Thomas replied.

“I missed you too, old friend. So tell me, for all the nosiness of the scandal sheets, is what they say true? Have you finally turned your

back on multiple ladies' beds in search of '*your one and only*'?"

"You sound dubious." Thomas was tempted to laugh as he sipped his punch.

"Not dubious," Antony disagreed. "Merely surprised. Why now?" Antony always had a way of getting to the heart of the matter that Thomas admired. There was both seriousness and lightness in his countenance, making many trust him easily. Having known Antony for so many years, Thomas trusted him more than any other.

"Timing," Thomas explained as he lowered the glass. "I'm tired, Antony. I want a new life."

"A new life." Antony smiled again. "I rather think that's the dream of most people here." He gestured to the faces around them, many of which were turned in their direction, whispering. "Everybody wants a life they do not have."

"Do you think?" Thomas asked with surprise.

“Oh yes, it’s the wish to better one’s self. And what is wrong with that?” Antony smiled, clearly feeling mischief as he began to point people out in the crowd. “For example, I see in the year that I have been away that Countess of Dalfern’s son appears not to be drinking at all.” He pointed out a young man across the room who was standing looking at the punch bowl, though he did not help himself. “Good thing too, considering how often I used to see him in a drunken stupor. There is Miss Winter too, who seems to have not taken her eyes away from you since you entered the room, though she used to keep her eyes on another. Perhaps she has set her hopes on being the future wife you seek.”

Thomas looked away from Miss Winter, not drawn in by the idea of her in the slightest, though he was amused by Antony’s words.

“Yes, I suppose you’re right. Many people strive for a new life, if they can get it,” Thomas said as his eyes passed over another young woman amongst the guests. Her eyes were also turned on him, but this time, he was not so disappointed by the stare.

She was a beauty indeed. With dark auburn hair framing her face

sweetly, she had delicate features too, and her long slender neck was draped with a bold sapphire necklace.

"Oh, but do I see your eyes are taken with another young lady?" Antony appeared to let the jest go, his manner returning to the serious countenance Thomas knew of old. "Who is that?"

"Miss Constance Henderson," Thomas recalled the name from the depths of his memory as the beauty looked away from him. He had met her once, at a party last year. He remembered thinking she was quite a dazzling woman on that occasion too, but he had been distracted, thinking of the opera he was to attend later that night and the young soprano who was to keep him company after.

"Don't stare too much, Thomas, or you'll make all the other young ladies jealous," Antony warned, but Thomas could not take his eyes off her.

It was not only that she was beautiful, but she was talking animatedly with her companions. She seemed to possess a confidence as she talked, drawing in a natural audience. As people laughed at

something she said, Thomas desired to cross the room, to know exactly what it was and to partake in the jest.

"By any chance, am I just a blurry shape to you now?" Antony laughed, waving his hand in front of Thomas' face, drawing Thomas' gaze back to him.

"Apologies, Antony. Miss Constance is quite . . ." He turned to look at her again.

The Sapphire of the Season.

That's how he would think of her. With that beautiful gem sitting so proudly on her neck, she sparkled just as much as the stone.

"Yes, I can well see just what you think of her," Antony said, following his gaze again. "Who is that? Beside her?"

"Her mother," Thomas answered quickly, his eyes turning to Mrs. Jane Henderson.

“No, you fool,” Antony said quickly. “On her other side.”

Thomas followed the instruction, his eyes settling on the young woman beside Constance.

“Oh, that is her sister, Miss Violet . . .?” He had to trawl through his memory to remember her name. “No, Viola. Viola Henderson.” Thomas looked swiftly over the woman.

She was much quieter than her sister, barely partaking in the conversation. Her face was marred by a bold scar too, reminding him of the gossip he had heard of how the young lady sustained the injury. He found his eyes drawn away from her quickly, back to Miss Constance.

Those hazel eyes were turned to his, and he held her gaze for a moment.

A beauty indeed.

“Fancy being introduced, Antony?” Thomas said quickly, seeing a

good excuse for talking to the young woman.

“From the fact you’re already walking away from me, it appears I don’t have much choice in the matter.” Antony laughed under his breath, following him.

Chapter 4

Constance

Constance was surprised by her own involuntary gaze. More than once had she found her eyes slipping toward the much-talked-of Mr. Thomas Bennett. She had remembered seeing him before, but she did not recall how striking a figure he was.

She was frustrated at herself for it. She always considered herself as being relatively in control of her emotions, yet here her body was ruling her mind, and no matter how many times she chastised herself, she looked anyway. Her eyes would dance across his tall lithe figure, the light blue eyes set in a strong, angular face, and the mop of well-styled black hair. It was little wonder so many women in the room were watching him.

When he had returned her look, she had felt burned by it. Caught watching him, she looked away. Yet her gaze turned back again, and this time, he held her gaze for longer, apparently unashamed to be staring at her so brazenly.

He plays with women's hearts. Remember that!

She was convinced he was walking toward her once, but he and his friend were interrupted, stopped in their path by other guests. Constance tried to ignore the disappointment she felt and turned her attention back to the conversation she was having with Viola, Jane, and Jane's good friend, Esme Miller.

"I'm just not convinced; that is all I'm saying," Esme said with clear pride, her chin tilted high.

"Why not?" Jane asked. "Have you not read the scandal sheets?"

"Mother." Constance smiled. "I think Esme is pointing out that those papers are hardly the most reliable source of information."

"Precisely!" Esme snapped her fingers with glee. "Mark my words, this is all a pretense of Mr. Thomas Bennett's."

"Why would he do that?" Jane was clearly doubtful of this argument.

“Perhaps it is at the insistence of the Baron and the Baroness,” Esme reasoned, shrugging. “Once married, he’ll be back in Covent Garden again. He’ll have more mistresses than there are debutantes. I’d wager good money on it.”

“That is rather harsh.” Viola’s sudden words made Constance turn to her in surprise. Viola barely took part in conversations when they were out at such parties, preferring to stay quiet. “Is it so ridiculous to think a man could want to change his ways? Perhaps we should give him the benefit of the doubt.”

Constance could scarcely believe it. Viola seemed to have found her voice, and she was speaking out in defense of a man she barely knew. Constance was about to ask why Viola felt the need to defend a known rake, but the sudden appearance of that very man made her close her mouth again.

“Mrs. Henderson, Mrs. Miller.” Thomas bowed to Jane and Esme. “It is lovely to see you again.”

“And you, Mr. Bennett.” Jane curtsied. “You remember my

daughters? This is Miss Constance and Miss Viola Henderson."

Constance had to bite her lip so as not to point out the error of her mother's ways. It was customary for the elder child to be introduced first, and here their mother was blatantly making the error, so keen to push Constance forward.

Oh Mother, you are not being subtle!

She cast a quick glance at Viola and saw the pain such a simple act caused, though her sister clearly tried to hide it.

"Of course, it's a pleasure to see you both." Despite Mr. Bennett's words, Constance did not miss the way he kept his eyes on her. Unable to feel bad on this occasion, Constance found herself thinking much of the dazzling smile Thomas offered her as she curtsied. She felt weak at the knees and momentarily wondered if she could stand straight again.

He is a handsome man indeed!

The man beside Thomas had to clear his throat, reminding him of his presence.

“Ah, how could I forget you, Antony.” Thomas smiled.

“You did seem distracted. I’ll introduce myself,” the man teased quickly. “My name is Antony Webster, Marquess of Salisbury.”

All of the ladies curtsied as he offered a bow, but Constance looked away from him quickly, back to gazing at Mr. Bennett, who had still not torn his own gaze from her.

“I believe we have not seen you before, my lord?” Jane said politely.

“No, I have been travelling in the Far East for some time,” the Marquess explained. This piece of information caught Constance’s interest, and she finally looked towards the man.

“The Far East! You must have many tales of such a place,” she commented, but was surprised to find that the Marquess did not look

at her as she spoke.

He seems much more concerned with Viola!

This was a rare occurrence indeed and prompted Constance to smile all the more.

“A few,” the Marquess agreed. “But I am relieved to be back in London.”

“It seems he has been missing London society.” Mr. Bennett smiled.

“Truly? Could such events as these compare to the exotic world of the Far East?” Constance doubted it.

“They have different attractions,” the Marquess explained. His eyes kept darting down to Viola, but Constance could see her sister did not return the gaze. “For one, they do not have such dances as these,” he remarked just as a group of violinists set up at the far end of the ballroom.

“Speaking of which.” Mr. Bennett stepped toward Constance, offering her his hand. “We should enjoy such things whilst we can. Miss Constance, would you do me the honor of the next dance?”

Constance couldn’t stop the smile from resuming its place on her face. Dancing with such a handsome man, even with his reputation, definitely had its allures. Out of the corner of one eye, she could see her mother nodding eagerly, desperate for her to agree, but on the other side of her vision, she caught sight of Viola, and the look on her face made Constance hesitate.

There was something that crossed her features, a heavy kind of sadness, and Constance thought she knew what it was. Usually, at events like these, Constance would turn down most offers for a dance, preferring to stay at Viola’s side. Viola was never asked to dance, and Constance did not like to think of her being lonely.

She opened her mouth to refuse Mr. Bennett, despite her longing to accept.

“My apologies, Mr. Bennett, but I—”

“Constance was only saying earlier how much she longed for a dance,” Viola interrupted her before she could finish, offering a small smile. The smile was tight, uncomfortable, and it made Constance hesitate.

She was confused, unable to match the sad look on Viola’s face with the encouragement of her words. She wanted to ensure Viola knew she was happy to stay by her side, but Constance could not do so in front of so many expectant faces.

She also did not particularly want to turn down Mr. Bennett. The temptation to accept was too great.

“Yes, Mr. Bennett.” She turned back to look at him. “I would be delighted.”

Mr. Bennett’s great smile seemed to match her own as he took her hand and led her toward the space now created for the dancers. Constance tried to ignore the butterflies Mr. Bennett’s touch created in

her stomach as she looked back over her shoulder to Viola, but her sister would not meet her gaze.

I will only be gone a short while, Viola, I promise.

As Mr. Bennett bowed to her, she curtsied, and the violins struck up in a gentle lyrical waltz. Feeling his hand take hold of hers, and the other move to her waist, Constance was breathless. So much so, that it took her a moment to think of something to say as they spun around the floor together.

“Are you enjoying the party, Mr. Bennett?” She decided to begin with pleasantries, hoping that polite conversation would soften the powerful blush that had taken over her cheeks at his strong stare.

“I was not at first, I will confess,” he said, his voice just a whisper. “I expect it has not escaped your notice that I am quite the center of gossip this evening.”

“True,” she agreed, pleased he had brought up the conversation so that they did not have to avoid it. “Most men would be delighted to

be so talked of!"

"I am not most men," he accepted, twirling her around the room and easily preventing a collision with another couple. The ease and skill with which he danced made Constance admire him all the more. "Believe me, being the topic of the ton's gossip does not bring much happiness."

"Believe me, Mr. Bennett, I sympathize." Constance tried to glance across the room toward Viola, but she could not see her sister through the sea of heads. "My own family knows the pain that cruel whispers can cause."

"Ah, are you referring to your sister?" he asked kindly, his voice gentle as he spun her again.

"Indeed I am. I hope you will forgive my reticence for dancing with you, Mr. Bennett, but I do not like to leave my sister alone on these occasions. As you say, hearing gossip of oneself does not bring any happiness," she admitted, surprised how easy it was to tell him of this secret. She supposed it was because he knew more than any other

in the room the pain of the ton's prattle.

"Then I am sorry indeed for you and your sister," he said warmly. "But enough of the sad things in our lives. I wish to talk of happy things."

"Happy things?"

"I'm always looking for an excuse to enjoy myself, Miss Constance," he said with a great smile.

"Oh, yes, I have heard," she teased, making him jokingly narrow his eyes at her.

"And that is the last word we will have this evening in reference to that gossip, agreed?" he asked, with warmth.

"Agreed." She was pleased to feel his hand tighten in hers at her assent. It was a gentle touch, yet soothing, urging her to glance down at their connection before returning her eyes to his blue gaze.

She had never known such a spark. It was making her breathing grow even more fluttered, and her mouth was dry. “So, what do you wish to speak of?”

“Tell me of yourself,” he urged. “What is it you like to do when you’re not attending the events of the ton?”

“I play the pianoforte,” she said readily. “Most days I fill the house with music, much to everyone’s annoyance when I make mistakes.”

“If you are proficient, then I doubt there are many mistakes,” Mr. Bennett assured.

“On the contrary. We must make mistakes if we are to improve ourselves, don’t you think?” she asked, as he turned her around the room, very narrowly avoiding another collision.

“Are we still talking about the pianoforte or life in general?” he asked, swiftly taking her away from the other couple.

“Perhaps I should apply this to our dancing skills instead of the piano.” Her soft words made him laugh heartily.

“True, I must improve and be more aware of my surroundings, or soon we will collide with another couple.” He gestured to the people around them. “You must forgive me though, as I’m a little distracted by my dance partner.”

“Distracted?” The idea thrilled her, and she did not miss the dazzling smile he offered her once more. She fought against the temptation, reminding herself that he was a charmer—he could use such talents and compliments to draw in any lady he wanted. “You are a charmer, Mr Bennett. Are these compliments you give to every lady you dance with?”

“Oh, you are quick, Miss Constance. Though I can’t deny I am practiced at such compliments,” he said self-deprecatingly, “that does not mean I do not mean them when I say them.”

“Well said,” she approved with a nod.

“I’m glad I impressed you. I must continue to try to do so!” he declared as he twirled her around the room again, causing her to laugh.

Constance grew aware as they lost themselves in their dance, teasing each other on their dancing skills, that she had an audience. She flicked her head to the side, seeking out the eyes that were following her.

The gaze belonged to Brandon Lawrence, the Marquess of Devonshire, a man set to inherit a dukedom. A very handsome man indeed, he had his own gathering of young ladies around him, no doubt drawn in by his blond hair coiffed perfectly, and the chiseled jawline that belonged in a Renaissance painting. Those keen eyes followed her as she danced, and she looked sharply away from him.

Unlike when Mr. Bennett’s gaze had been upon her across the room, she did not have that fluttering excitement in her chest, but dread. She had no liking for the Marquess of Devonshire, for he was a proud and conceited man. She wished he would desist with his staring, as it made her wish to run from the room and escape those

eyes.

Chapter 5

Viola

Viola wasn't sure what was happening to her, but she felt a riot of emotions whirring. Watching Constance twirling around the ballroom in the arms of Mr. Bennett was pure agony.

I thought perhaps he could be the one thing that was mine, not Constance's!

She felt her mouth part as she watched them, seeing the way her sister laughed as she danced with the handsome Mr. Bennett. Of course, she was pleased to see her sister so happy. Naturally she would be! That's what she kept telling herself, yet did she have to have the one thing Viola had pinned her hopes on in order to be happy?

Viola closed her eyes for a brief moment, trying to look away from the tormenting view of Mr. Bennett and Constance. Behind her eyes, just for a moment, like a flicker, she could see herself in Mr. Bennett's arms, dancing around the room. For once, she would bear the smile that Constance had on her face, and perhaps her scar would

not matter so much then.

Viola opened her eyes and walked away from her mother and Esme, suddenly needing a little distance from the clamor and the heat of so many people. Yet her eyes just kept slipping back to Constance across the room.

I should be happy for her. No, I am *happy for her! I love my sister dearly.*

No matter how many times she thought these words, she could not stop the envy that rose within her. She pictured it rather being like a mist, tinged green. Whereas before she had been able to keep the mist at bay, used to Constance always earning the attention of their mother, this moment had changed things. That mist had spread through her now, reaching down to the very tips of the fingers that she clenched together.

How is it that Constance can always have everyone's attention? Attention I crave?

“Miss Viola?” A voice disturbed her thoughts. She whipped her head round to see the Marquess of Salisbury at her side with two glasses of punch in his hands. “Here, this is for you.” He extended a glass toward her. She took it automatically, speechless for a moment as his fingers brushed hers.

He is bringing me punch . . .? No gentleman has been so forward with me before.

“Er, thank you,” she hurried to say, trying to remember her manners. They had only had a brief introduction before her attention had been distracted by Mr. Bennett whisking Constance away to dance. This was the first time she looked properly at the man in front of her.

He was tall and well-built, as evidenced by the way his tailcoat stretched across his broad shoulders, and his dark eyes were watching her keenly. The strength of that gaze startled her. She rather imagined they were like eyes she would find in some great William Hogarth portrait—dark yet full of life within.

“I thought you might be thirsty,” he explained quickly, almost a little awkwardly.

“It was very kind of you,” she said, though a little taken aback. No man ever approached her so, especially when there was no Constance at her side to talk to. No gentleman liked to be seen talking with her alone, as they knew the gossip about her, and they all were too put out by the sight of the scar.

Suddenly conscious of it, she dropped her head forward, looking down at the punch, causing the loose locks of her hair to fall across her cheek, and hopefully hide a little of that mark.

She expected him to walk away. If he considered it a politeness to bring her a drink, then he had done his duty, but he did not leave, and a strange quietness extended between the two of them.

“You mentioned you have been travelling in the Far East.” She clawed a topic from the air, trying to lift her eyes to him, but not too much, so that her hair was still strewn across her face.

“Yes,” he said, his dark eyes still keenly watching her. She was unsettled by it; she knew only one reason people would stare at her. “It was quite an adventure. Do you know much of the East?”

“Very little,” she said, trying to think of how to walk away from him without seeming rude, but failing. “I have not travelled much.”

“Do you wish to?” His words astonished her again. No one ever asked her what she wished for.

“I . . . er . . .” She faltered for a minute, thinking how often she had wished for just that thing. To escape London and the ton, and to see the world. She had only ever dreamed of wandering through the landscapes she painted, imagining what it would be like to escape through those rolling English hills, but now she pushed her imagination a little further. She thought of what sights she could see in Singapore, the mountains, and the rivers of the Orient. “I would like that very much, but we do not all have the privilege of escaping the bounds of our home so easily.”

She was surprised such an outspoken comment came from her

lips. She rarely spoke her thoughts to strangers.

"Very true." He smiled a little, which lit up his dark features. "I was lucky indeed to travel so great a distance, but luck only goes so far."

"What do you mean?" Viola was intrigued, lifting her face a little, allowing the hair to slide off her cheek.

"The truly lucky ones are those that have someone to share that kind of thing with. Believe me, Miss Viola. When you see such places, there's nothing more you could want than to turn to the person next to you and talk of the landscape's beauty with them. Finding no one there to talk to . . . well, as I say, I was not so lucky." His smile stayed in place despite the sadness of his words.

How strange! I dream of the countryside to escape into loneliness, and he finds that loneliness too much.

"I am sorry for it," she said politely and went back to sipping her punch. "Thank you for the drink." She sought again to escape his

company. She had lost sight of Mr. Bennett and Constance and wished to look for them. “You must have many people to see again now that you are home from your travels, many faces here tonight you hope to speak with?” It was the perfect opener for him to leave, but he shook his head.

“No, I have greeted those whose acquaintance I wish to renew, and I am currently enjoying our conversation.” The charm of his words made Viola shift her feet.

He does not mean it. He’s probably intrigued by the gossip he has heard this evening and has decided to see for himself what he makes of the aberration that I am.

She nodded and kept her focus on her punch, feeling as though the ground were uneven beneath her feet.

What does he want?

His was staring at her so strongly that she could feel a blush creeping into her cheeks. Bearing with the gossipers was hard enough,

but being faced with someone who stared at her so intensely was too much! Finally, she tilted her chin up, deciding that she would speak her mind and put an end to his curious gaze forever.

"Tell me, my lord, have you been to Egyptian Hall since your return?" She could see she had surprised him, his dark brow furrowed.

"No, I have not," he said. "Why do you ask?"

"You seem to be fond of staring, my lord. I can assure you there are a great many oddities there for you to look so keenly at. Oddities that are on display and welcome such stares as yours." She kept her voice calm as she spoke, hoping the Marquess would take the words at their full meaning and walk away from her.

He smiled as he lifted his punch to his lips and took another sip, holding her gaze over the rim of the glass.

He is smiling?

"You are not fond of being stared at, Miss Viola?" He seemed to

find some humor in the situation. It riled her further.

"Not at all," she said quickly. "I am rather tired of being stared at and whispered about."

"I am not whispering about you." His smile had grown greater. "I'm here talking to you, and I apologize for staring. I am out of practice in trying to charm an elegant woman like yourself into talking with me."

"Elegant?" she repeated in shock before she could stop herself. She was tempted to snap at him, but her quiet nature would not allow her.

You stare at me because I am peculiar. That is all.

"Yes, elegant," he said firmly. "I see I am *not* doing a very good job in charming you at all." He laughed at himself.

"Well, I—" She faltered, not knowing what to say to this strange turn in the conversation.

“Perhaps I should try again.” He lowered his glass and raised his chin. “Let us undo our conversation a little. Let us go back to the moment you asked if I had visited Egyptian Hall. Instead of my original answer, I offer this one instead . . . I have heard many good things about the place, but I prefer art to the relics they have there. You will probably find me traipsing through the corridors of Somerset House or the Dulwich Gallery on most days.”

Viola was surprised at her temptation to smile, and even more shocked by the fact she could not stop it. There was definitely an easy charm to the Marquess, and his backtracking their conversation almost tempted her to laugh. Almost.

“You like art, my lord?” She had now turned her face up to him completely, no longer attempting to look down and avoid his gaze.

“Very much so. I have favorite painters and am known to have many debates on who I think the real masters are,” he said easily. “Do you like art yourself?”

“I do.” She nodded eagerly. “Though I much prefer landscapes to portraits.”

“Can I ask why?” he encouraged her.

“There is a greater story in a landscape, I always find,” she said, looking away from him in thought for a moment.

“Never was a truer word said,” he agreed with a smile.

Very well, I will allow the Marquess to be an interesting man.

“There is to be an exhibition at Somerset House in five days’ time that I have been looking forward to seeing,” he continued. “Have you heard of it?”

“Yes, of course,” she said quickly. “Though I believe tickets are few and far between.”

“Not if you know who to talk to.” He dropped his voice, as though the matter were a great secret.

Viola did laugh this time. The sound amazed even herself.

“Viola? I thought I heard your voice,” Jane’s voice came from through the crowd. Viola turned to see her mother rushing to her side.

“Mother, I—” Viola was interrupted by Jane before she could say anymore.

“Did I hear the two of you speaking of Somerset House?” She addressed this question to the Marquess. With a quick look away, Viola lowered her gaze to the punch glass in her hand.

I am to be invisible again.

“Yes,” the Marquess confirmed. “We were talking of art.”

“Oh, Viola is a great artist herself.” Jane’s praise astonished Viola so much that she looked up sharply. Her mother placed a hand on her shoulder, an act of warmth. “She is always doing these watercolors. The house is littered with them!” Jane laughed.

Viola looked at the Marquess, blushing crimson red at this sudden outpouring from her mother.

Of all the moments my mother chooses to say something kind of me, and she deems this the right one?

If Viola could have orchestrated a way to slip away from the two of them and hide in the crowd, she would have done so. Especially in order to escape the Marquess' strong gaze, which had returned to her.

"You are a painter yourself?" he asked, turning to Viola.

"I—"

"She is a very competent painter, indeed," Jane answered for her, forcing Viola to close her mouth after being interrupted. "I always tell her she should paint her sister, Constance, for she would make such a fine portrait."

Hearing these words made Viola's hands begin to fidget around

the punch glass. She had no doubt Constance would make an exceptionally beautiful painting, but Viola was not interested in painting her. She already watched her sister for hours at a time, admiring her beauty; what torment would it be to have to sit and paint every fine line of her face? It would surely only make Viola more envious than she already was.

"Indeed, she would," the Marquess spoke quickly as he kept his gaze on Viola. "But like Miss Viola here, I prefer landscapes to portraits. I would encourage her to stick to the beauty of the countryside."

Viola couldn't help but smile at his words, though she didn't quite understand what the Marquess was about.

He seems awfully eager in his conversation if he has just come to stare at my scar.

"Landscapes are fine indeed, but someday I'm sure I'll persuade Viola to turn her hand to just a little portrait of her sister. Speaking of which, there you are, Constance!" Jane's joyful voice signaled the

arrival of Constance back at their side.

Viola was pleased when Constance slipped her arm in her own. She felt she needed that silent support of her sister after what had just taken place.

I love you, Constance, so dearly! You are the one who comes closest to understanding what I go through.

“And you have brought Mr. Bennett with you, I see,” Jane’s voice continued.

Viola’s abruptly happy feelings dropped low again. The blue eyes of Mr. Bennett, the ones she had thought so much of recently, were fixed entirely on Constance.

“We had to take a break from dancing, Mother,” Constance explained. “It is so hot in here!”

“That it is,” Jane agreed.

“Thomas,” the Marquess said, turning his attention to Mr. Bennett. “I wonder if I could beg your company while I do a few rounds?”

“Of course, if Miss Constance would be willing to spare a second dance for me later this evening?” Mr. Bennett returned his gaze to Constance, who Viola felt practically flutter with pleasure.

“I promise to save another for you,” she said sweetly.

“Excellent, then I will be back shortly.” He bowed, holding her gaze as she curtsied.

Viola looked between the two of them in utter dismay.

He never even looked at me. Not once. He is smitten with Constance.

She was debating how unfair a place the world was when the Marquess bowed too. She caught his eye as he left, seeing the last smile he offered her before disappearing through the guests.

“Well, what two fascinating gentlemen!” Jane said, pulling free a fan from her wrist and flapping her face with it. “Mr. Bennett is very taken with you, Constance. Don’t you think so, Viola?”

“Yes, very much,” Viola said through gritted teeth.

He was the one thing I hoped would be mine, Constance. Did you have to accept a second dance?

“Speaking of fascinating men,” Jane continued, “here comes another.”

“Fascinating?” Constance took up the thread of the conversation, flicking her head to the side. “I beg to differ,” she whispered to Viola. “I can think of many alternative words to describe this particular gentleman.”

Viola sought out the man walking toward them: Brandon Lawrence, the Marquess of Devonshire.

He was crossing the room, clearly making a beeline for them.

With fair hair and sharp features, he was considered one of the most handsome young men in the ton at present, but Viola knew as well as Constance the arrogant reputation that followed him. Even as he walked, he seemed to be looking down his long nose at the people he passed, his chin so high that he would surely struggle to see anyone shorter than his shoulder in the room.

"Do you think he ever gets neck ache from holding his chin so high?" Viola whispered to Constance, earning a laugh that Jane tried to quiet as the Marquess of Devonshire reached them, bowing deeply.

"Good evening, ladies. It is a pleasure to see you again," he said as he stood straight from his bow. To Viola's mind, his accent was overly posh, with the vowels so rounded it grated on her ears.

"And to you, my lord," Jane said, curtsying deeply with a simpering smile. "I have not yet seen you dance this evening, my lord?"

"I have been waiting for the right partner, is all." His eyes slipped straight from Jane to Constance. "Miss Constance, could you

spare the next dance?”

Viola could see how reluctant Constance was. Never before had Viola wanted her sister to accept a dance so badly, purely out of the hope that perhaps Constance would soften toward the Marquess.

After all, is not a marquess better placed than a future baron? Mr. Bennett would have to look elsewhere if Constance were betrothed to another . . .

“Constance is very fond of dancing,” Jane stepped in before Constance could answer. “I’m sure she would be happy to dance with you, my lord.”

Viola felt guilty as Constance disentangled their arms.

“Yes, my lord. I would be delighted.” Though Constance clearly did not mean the words, she accepted anyway, and the Marquess led her away.

Viola looked between Jane and the receding form of Constance,

unsure whether to be happy that Jane had secured the very thing Viola wanted, or guilty that her sister was having to suffer the company of a man she did not like.

Chapter 6

Antony

Antony was trying to tune out Thomas' gushing about the lovely Miss Constance as they made their way to the parlor. His thoughts were on the other sister entirely.

Miss Viola Henderson . . . what an enthralling woman!

"Miss Constance's confidence is something I have not seen often before—quite a captivating young lady," Thomas was still outpouring his admiration.

"You and I find different things interesting in ladies, I believe, my friend," Antony said with a shake of his head as they closed the parlor door behind them. This space was reserved for gentlemen, used as both a smoking and card room.

"What do you mean?" Thomas looked back at him in surprise. "There is no need to be coy, Antony. You cannot deny that Miss Constance is a beauty indeed."

“A beauty, yes. I would be a fool to argue she was not, a blind fool too. But I did not find Miss Constance nearly as interesting as her sister,” Antony explained as a server passed by and offered two glasses of claret to them.

“Miss Viola? Truly?” Thomas looked startled by the idea.

“For all the thunder in the skies, I do not think I have ever seen you so surprised by anything I’ve said before.” Antony laughed.

“I didn’t mean anything by it.” Thomas chuckled too, shaking his head at himself. “Whist?” he suggested, gesturing to a card table that had just become free. Antony nodded and followed him quickly to the table.

“You have not heard the gossip about Miss Viola, then?” Thomas asked, clearly nervous as he took his seat.

“Why should I care for gossip?” Antony looked at him as he shuffled a stack of cards. “You more than anyone should know how harmful gossip can be.”

“Very true,” Thomas accepted easily, nodding and casting his black hair across his forehead. “I guess, to my eyes, Miss Viola does not have the confidence nor the wit of her younger sister.”

“Ha! You think so?” Antony found this idea very amusing. “Confidence, perhaps not, but that merely shows me you have not had an actual conversation with Miss Viola. Why, in the short discussion I just had with her, believe me, I saw much wit indeed.”

“Really?” Thomas’ eyebrows raised as a few other gentlemen joined their table, preparing to play as Antony dealt out the cards. “Well, perhaps it is a good thing we each prefer a different sister,” he said, dropping his voice to a whisper.

“True,” Antony agreed. “Think of the trouble it would cause if we both liked the same sister.” Antony laughed as their attentions were consumed by the game.

For a few minutes, he grew lost in the play, trying to win his hand, but after the play of each round, Antony found his mind drawn

back to the young woman he had just met.

Clearly, unlike Thomas, Antony was not charmed by someone like Miss Constance. He had always preferred the company of someone whom you had to make an effort to get to know. He had had much experience of people who wore their hearts on their sleeves, for everyone to see, and though he did not have a problem with it in the whole, it had left him with a desire to always know what was lurking in the depth of someone's heart. When someone had something in them that they were not so willing to show to the world, it often meant there was something intriguing to be uncovered there.

That was part of what had captivated him about Miss Viola. She was much quieter than her sister, and she seemed quite nervous. She clearly kept her heart locked tightly away in her chest, and Antony had felt a wish to know something of it. From the way in which she so often kept her gaze downward on her glass, or on the floor, it was as though she put up a wall between herself and the world around her.

What would it be like to peer beyond that wall?

As Antony won a round of their game and the deal was passed to Thomas, Antony's mind slipped back to the conversation he had had with Miss Viola. She had clearly been surprised, to say the least, by his approach. She had lowered her eyes to her punch, causing her hair to fall across her cheek, nearly hiding the mark that lurked there.

Why does she wish to hide it so?

Antony did not see why she should be ashamed of it. With her auburn hair, the red tones shimmering in the candlelight, those high cheekbones, matched with a pair of dazzling hazel eyes, she was stunning indeed. The scar only added a feature to her. Cut across that high cheekbone, it gave her face a definition that was missing from her younger sister's.

In the short conversation they had shared, Antony had felt awkward and tongue-tied more than once in his attempt to engage her in discussion. It was clear from her barb about the Egyptian Hall that she was accustomed to people staring at her scar, and Antony had desired to show her how that was not what intrigued him about her. He only hoped he had managed to persuade her of it.

In the end, partway through their game of whist, his eyes slid back to Thomas, and he opened their conversation again, determined to discover more about the enthralling Miss Viola.

“Do you know much of the Henderson sisters, Thomas?” he whispered, keeping his voice low so as not to disturb the other players.

“A little, though after just one dance I already feel I know a lot more about Miss Constance.” Thomas smiled, and it was a kind of dazed smile that pulled a laugh from Antony.

“Tell me, did you ever think it was possible to fall in love at first sight?” Antony saw his words were met with astonishment, prompting him to chuckle even more.

“I am not in love, you fool.” Thomas shook his head, though he was smiling all the same. “That would be fast indeed. No, I am merely . . .” He paused as he picked up his hand of cards and decided his play. The pause gave Antony a chance to be mischievous.

“Merely infatuated?” Antony prompted, earning another shake of Thomas’ head.

“I’m just now remembering how free my life has been of taunts since you went travelling,” Thomas pointed to him in emphasis.

“Well, you can rest now, for I have returned and will take up my place as your friendly tormentor with enthusiasm,” he teased, making Thomas laugh again.

“I am not infatuated,” he said firmly. “Merely charmed. And what is wrong with that?”

“Nothing at all, my friend,” Antony assured, knowing something of the feeling himself now.

Love at first sight was not something he had ever believed in, but when travelling in the Far East, he had made a stop in Singapore, and there had been a young couple there who he had become firm friends with. The man had declared quite openly that he knew from the

moment he met his wife in the busy streets of Singapore, that he would marry no other.

Antony could understand a little of what the man meant now, though at the time he had dismissed it as being idealistic. He rather liked the idea of returning to Miss Viola's side and trying to discover more of what she kept hidden in that heart of hers.

"Do you know anything of their family?" Antony asked Thomas, pushing the matter.

"Yes, their father is a wealthy man, though he possesses no title. Mr. Henderson's family is both well-respected and increasingly successful. Whoever does marry those sisters will be obtaining large dowries indeed," Thomas said in passing.

"I hope that is not the reason you found Miss Constance so enchanting . . ." Antony said, teasing again.

"You know very well it wasn't." Thomas passed him some of the cards from the center of the table, clearly put out that Antony had

won another round of their game. “Could you stop winning, Antony? You make the game boring.”

“Really? I was enjoying myself.” Antony placed the cards together.

“Yes, I could tell,” Thomas admitted. “I suppose it is no matter. The sooner this game is over, the sooner I can have another dance with Miss Constance.”

“You really are besotted.” Antony shuffled the cards together again.

“Well, it is the first time I have managed to secure a dance with her, though I admit I did not try especially hard before,” Thomas explained. “It’s said that at events like these, Miss Constance never leaves Miss Viola’s side. The two of them stand arm in arm together, and she turns down most men.”

“Why?” Antony frowned.

“Do you need ask?” Thomas gestured to his own cheek where Miss Viola’s scar laid. This simple gesture made Antony uncomfortable as he dealt out the cards.

“You make it sound as though she were deformed, Thomas,” Antony said quietly.

“Do I?” Thomas looked horrified by this thought. “Forgive me, I didn’t mean that. It is just that is the scar is highly likely to be the reason Miss Constance stays by her sister’s side. Something Miss Constance said while I was dancing with her reinforced the idea as well. She spoke of the gossip that follows her sister around and exclaimed that she did not like to leave Miss Viola to suffer it alone.”

“Admirable,” Antony commented. “Though it should not be required in the first place.”

“I know,” Thomas agreed with him.

Antony thought of the elegant woman he had just been speaking with and speculated about what had happened to her over the years to

make her so fearful. The whispers about her could hardly have helped, but then there was another thing . . . Antony thought back to the conversation with Mrs. Henderson and how she had pushed for her daughter to paint Miss Constance sometime.

Does Mrs. Henderson favor one daughter over the other?

No, Antony would not allow himself to believe it, but it would somehow explain why Miss Viola and Miss Constance always stayed arm in arm. She was her truest friend in the room.

Well, perhaps it is time Miss Viola had someone new to trust in her life.

Antony sat a little straighter in his seat as he played the round of cards, forming a plan in his mind.

"Well, I suppose I'll have to ask," Antony sighed, dismayed he felt compelled to find an answer to his next question by asking Thomas instead of asking the young woman directly. "Do the ton have a reliable story as to how Miss Viola got her scar?"

“I have heard many versions of the tale, some very fantastical indeed, but I believe this one to be the true story. Several years ago, Miss Viola and Miss Constance were in a carriage accident. Nobody knows what happened or how it was caused.”

“Ah, this would be where people come up with fantastical ideas of their own?” Antony guessed.

“Just so,” Thomas agreed. “What we do know is that the two young girls walked out of that accident with Miss Constance unharmed and Miss Viola suffering a wound on her face that eventually became the scar you see today.”

Antony sat back in his seat, feeling a little deflated by the idea. For such a fleeting and inconsequential event as a carriage accident to have affected Miss Viola’s life in such a way was unthinkable. Whereas most people could brush off such accidents, forget about them easily if they were unharmed, Miss Viola was reminded of it every day when she looked in the mirror.

“The world is sometimes a very cruel place,” Antony mused. He won another round and collected the cards from the table.

“Playing cards with you, it certainly seems so.” Thomas laughed before his face set straight again. “I just hope that Miss Viola’s woes do not hold back her sister.”

“I beg your pardon?” Antony looked up in surprise, pausing momentarily in his shuffling of the cards.

“Well, did you see Miss Viola’s face when I asked Miss Constance to dance just now?” Thomas appeared baffled. “Miss Viola cannot always keep Miss Constance at her side. She must learn to let her go.”

“I think you judge Miss Viola too harshly,” Antony said, returning his focus to dealing out the cards.

“It’s not that,” Thomas assured him. “I merely worry of Miss Constance being held back by a need to protect her sister. It’s as though the lady is trapped.”

“Trapped? Miss Constance did not look very trapped to me. Ah, no doubt you will now seek a way to help Miss Constance out of her trap regardless.” Antony shook his head, thinking that Thomas had seen two entirely different women than the ones Antony had seen.

It was as though they had looked at a portrait of two ladies in a gallery and came away thinking they were painted by two different artists.

Miss Viola is the one who looks trapped to my eyes.

“I may try.” Thomas smiled, responding to Antony’s last comment. “Miss Constance agreed to reserve a second dance for me, so perhaps my hopes are not in vain.”

“Perhaps not,” Antony agreed. “You have always had a way of charming any young lady . . .” He pointedly looked at Thomas, reminding him of his roguish reputation.

“That is in the past,” Thomas said firmly. “Any charming I do now will be with the hope of a church altar and a wedding ring in

mind, not for one night in a stranger's bed."

"I'm pleased to hear it. What ultimately changed your mind, by the way? You said 'timing' earlier, and that you just wanted a new life. Is that really the case?" Antony asked with suspicion.

"It is," Thomas assured. "That and something you did."

"Something *I* did?" Antony was shocked as he paused the game. "I have been on the other side of the world this last year."

"It was a letter that you sent whilst you were gone," Thomas explained, his expression somewhat wistful. "Do you remember a letter you sent me last autumn where you told me of Singapore?"

"I'm not likely to remember every word, but I remember something of it." Antony handed Thomas his cards, letting his opponent finally win a round.

"You talked of feeling lonely. That although some days you were surrounded by people, you asked if I had ever known the sensation of

standing in a crowd and yet not having anyone at your side to talk to. Do you remember that?" Thomas looked at him keenly.

Antony remembered it very well indeed. He had spoken something of it just a few minutes ago to Miss Viola. He had been tempted to gush at length to her about how beautiful the world was and how great it was to travel, but without someone to share it with, the world could be quite a lonely place.

"Well, I cannot tell you how those words have haunted me, Antony," Thomas said with honesty, his voice back to a whisper. "So, it helped me to come to the decision that it was time for a new life, and for that, I must thank you." He held out his hand suddenly, offering Antony a shake.

"I don't think you need to thank me for that." Antony laughed.

"Believe me, I do," Thomas assured him.

"Very well." Antony accepted the shake from his old friend. "But I think you have overestimated the effects of some drunken ramblings

that I wrote to you one night."

"So, you did not mean them?" Thomas asked, quirking an eyebrow.

"Oh, I meant them," Antony said, winning the next round.

"Perhaps it is time you found a wife too." Thomas smiled. "You did just say how taken you were with Miss Viola."

"I did, didn't I?" Antony smiled, remembering the way that Miss Viola had looked up at him halfway through their conversation, finally allowing that curl of dark auburn hair to fall away from her cheek and reveal her full face to him. "Well, we'll see."

I will certainly be trying to learn more of what Miss Viola hides in her heart.

Chapter 7

Constance

Constance was in a happy daze as she hurried into the breakfast room the morning after the dinner party. Her parents and Viola were already seated at the table, with Jane and Archibald deep in conversation about last night's events.

"Morning, my dear. You do have such a smile on your face." Jane was blushing with pride, sitting tall in her chair, with a teacup cradled in her hands.

"I am very happy indeed," Constance agreed as she took her seat beside Viola.

"The dinner party far exceeded my expectations, I have to say!" Jane declared as she looked around the room. "And I knew it would be a good one. I knew Constance would receive much attention, didn't I say so, Archibald? But I had never expected such gentlemen to approach you last night, my dear. It was quite the event!"

"Viola, did you enjoy the ball?" Constance turned excitedly in

her seat, hoping that her sister would say something of it with a smile, but Viola didn't even look up to meet her gaze; she kept her eyes down on the bread on her plate.

"It was a pleasant evening." Viola was lying; Constance could see it easily.

She couldn't help but turn back around in her seat with a little disappointment. She had tried to stay at Viola's side as much as possible, to shield her from any gossip or harsh stares that may have come her way, but it was impossible to be there all the time.

Was there any harm in me enjoying a few dances anyway?

She was torn as she considered this thought, undecided as to whether she had done something wrong by not staying at Viola's side or if she should be pleased that she had finally accepted a few gentlemen's advances.

"Oh, Archibald." Jane was off again in her effusive chatter of the event. "So many gentlemen approached Constance last night; her

dance card would have been full had she not turned down so many."

"Mother, I accepted a few," Constance said, pleading with her eyes for Jane to be quiet, but her mother seemed not to understand. Constance kept looking at Viola who appeared impassive and distant, still staring at her food.

"Archibald, did you see who our Constance danced with?" Jane twisted in her seat, nearly spilling her tea in her excitement.

"Even if I had, I have a feeling you are going to tell me again regardless." Archibald's wit seemed lost on their mother as she did indeed carry on speaking as though he hadn't said anything at all.

"The Marquess of Devonshire!" These exuberant words made Constance's head snap toward Jane in concern. She had expected her mother to say Mr. Bennett's name, for he was the man Constance had not stopped thinking of since their first dance together. He was also the only man she had danced with twice.

The Marquess of Devonshire . . . Mother, please do not speak of him!

“He’s a rather conceited gentleman, Mother,” Constance began slowly.

“Was he a poor dancer?” Jane asked. In response, Constance saw Viola laugh, showing some animation for the first time over breakfast.

“I think our mother is more concerned with his dancing prowess than his manner.” Viola continued to chuckle, drawing a laugh from Archibald too.

“His dancing qualities are immaterial, Mother,” Constance pleaded.

“He’s a marquess, dearest! And he is in line to inherit a dukedom. In a few years, he will be the next Duke of Wellington,” Jane said with wide eyes. “Surely, Constance, you would not spurn such a man’s attentions. Even I could see he had a great liking for you. Would you turn down being the next Duchess of Wellington?”

Duchess? We have jumped from one conversation to the next very

quickly!

The face of Mr. Bennett flashed before Constance's eyes, showing her with certainty that she had no wish to become the Duchess of Wellington. She hesitated for a minute, opening her mouth to argue with her mother and then remembering the gossip that followed Mr. Bennett.

He is a known rogue. Last night could have been passing charm only.

Constance was deflated at the thought, hoping that Mr. Bennett had been as charmed by her as she had been by him.

"Oh yes, I can see it now," Jane was still gushing. "You could be married within the year."

"Mother!" Constance looked up sharply, aware from the corner of her eye that Viola had gone very still.

It was custom for the eldest child to marry first. It was what was known and usually done. For Jane to not only suggest that Constance

marry first, but actively *encourage* it . . . it made it seem as though she was announcing Viola as a spinster already.

Constance was horrified, looking between the now vacant expression on Viola's face and the eager excitement on Jane's.

"Mother, I think you are jumping ahead a little." She tried to hint at her true meaning, glancing at Viola with her mother watching her, but Jane still seemed impervious to her meaning.

"Nonsense. If you can capture the Marquess of Devonshire's heart, you'll have a very happy future indeed," Jane said as she topped off her tea.

I do not want to marry him, and I do not want to marry before Viola!

Constance was tempted to shout this, but it would be expressing something that they did not speak of: Jane's constant disregard for her eldest daughter. To speak of it would just be too awful to bear.

"Jane." Archibald sat forward in his seat suddenly. A quiet man

himself, it made them all look at him in surprise. “If you are to marry Constance off so quickly, may I encourage you to concentrate some of your attentions on our eldest daughter first?”

“I’m sorry?” Jane’s smile vanished, prompting Constance to close her eyes in utter despair of the awkwardness that followed.

“If you would excuse me,” Viola said, her voice cold as she stood to her feet.

“Viola, where are you going?” Constance stood too, eager to follow her.

“I have finished my breakfast.” Viola was distant as she walked past her toward the door. “I am eager to start on a new painting.”

With this last word, the door was closed quietly. Constance flicked her head back round to see Jane looking bewildered and Archibald shaking his head.

“Did I say something to upset her?” Jane asked, clearly none the

wiser.

Constance pinched the bridge of her nose, choosing not to reply. The only answer to her mother's words was her father's cutlery being heavily set down on his plate.

Constance was seated at the pianoforte some hours later, trying to lose herself in her playing, but the task was a difficult one. Try as she might, her eyes kept moving away from the keys towards Viola on the other side of the room.

Viola had taken up her usual position by the double doors that led outside into their garden. She was frowning as she worked, with a couple of flecks of paint on her cheeks and on the apron that she wore over her dress.

Constance had asked her more than once what she was painting. Usually, Viola would happily tell her of the scenes, but not today, it seemed. Viola kept the canvas turned away too, far from prying eyes. It caused a knot in Constance's stomach, to the point that she was beginning to feel resentment grow.

Why is she so distant with me today? I tried to stay with her last night! Truly, I tried.

"Oh, more scandals," Jane's voice disturbed her thoughts as she wafted into the room and took her usual place in the chair nearest to Constance. "Would you like to hear what they say of last night?"

Constance broke off from her piece and turned to her mother, knowing that even if she refused, her mother would tell her anyway.

"Yes," she said tightly, turning on the piano stool.

"They talk of two interesting gentlemen from last night, Constance." Jane giggled, appearing much younger than her age for a brief moment. "Listen to this. '*The much-talked-of Mr Bennett has so far stayed true to his resolution to behave, doing the rounds at the ball yesterday evening with poise and restraint, but it did not escape our attention last night that this newly-reformed gentleman already seems to have a favorite, even after one ball. But we urge caution before any readers run to buy a new gown for a wedding. Mr. Bennett will have his work cut*

out if he wishes to secure the hand of the beauty he danced with last night, for she was also seen dancing with the Marquess of Devonshire. Well, we cannot wait to see which gentleman the young lady in question chooses as her next dance partner, and though I mention no names, I feel confident in saying that most readers will know who I am writing of, when they hear that last night she was labeled as The Sapphire of the Season*, by more than one person.'* Did you hear that, Constance?"

Constance's hand went automatically to her neck where her mother's sapphire had sat just the night before.

They are writing about me?

There was a clatter behind them, and Constance swiveled on the piano stool to see Viola gathering paintbrushes she had dropped on the floor. She gathered them quickly, though she kept her eyes down when the task was done.

"That's not possible," Constance said more to herself than to her mother. "They wrote that?"

“See for yourself. Look.” Jane thrust the scandal sheet under her nose. Constance read the words, feeling anger grow more and more in her stomach.

It was pure ire, directed at two sides, first at the writer who had dared to link her name to the Marquess of Devonshire’s, and secondly at her mother for reading out this trivial nonsense so gleefully in front of Viola.

“Mother, it is just a silly scandal sheet,” Constance said as she handed it back. “We should pay no more heed to it than we would to gossip in the streets.” She turned back to the pianoforte and began to play again, determined to ignore its contents from then on.

“But . . . Constance—”

“It is drivel, Mother. Nothing more.” Constance allowed herself a glance to Viola’s place by her easel. She had a small smile upon her cheeks. Constance returned that smile, uncertain what had caused her sister’s relaxing of indifference toward her but pleased of it.

“Miss Constance?” The butler’s voice from the open doorway disturbed Constance, and she broke off from her piece to look at him.

“Yes, Saunders?” she asked.

“You have a caller,” the butler explained.

Before Constance could even think to stop her mother’s excited outburst, Jane had taken hold of her arm and pulled her to her feet, fussing with her dress and her hair.

“Mother, I look perfectly fine.” Constance waved her away.

“Oh, my dear, you are always beautiful.” Jane stepped back, smiling, allowing Constance a view of Viola, with a frown back on her features. Constance tried not to think of that expression as she turned to Saunders.

“Please, show them in.” She gestured to the butler who stepped out again.

“I wonder who it is,” Jane said, bobbing on her toes.

“I know who I *want* it to be,” Constance mumbled just to herself, so her mother could not hear her. She tried to relax the knot that had formed in her stomach at the sudden hope, but she could not help it.

Please be Mr. Bennett.

In answer to her thought, the butler returned, and behind him was Mr. Bennett, carrying a large bunch of white roses.

“Oh.” Constance sighed involuntarily at the sight of them. He caught her eyes as he stepped into the room, a great smile upon his features, lighting up those startling blue eyes.

“Mrs. Henderson, Miss Constance,” he greeted them, bowing.

There was another clatter, and Constance turned to see Viola had dropped her paintbrushes again. She gathered them quickly and stood straight.

“Miss Viola,” Mr. Bennett added, bowing to her too, clearly only then realizing that she was in the room before looking back to Constance. “Miss Constance, these are for you.” He presented her with the bunch.

“Mr. Bennett, they are quite simply stunning,” she replied, smiling as she took them from him and inhaling their soft scent. She had never been given such a gift before. “You came all this way to give me these?”

“That and to issue an invitation,” he explained quickly. “If you are available, I wish to escort you to the promenade hour later this afternoon?” The look on his face was so hopeful that Constance felt the knot that had been in her stomach previously jump with a jolt of excitement.

Last night was not something I imagined after all. He really was as taken with me as I was with him!

“I . . .” She was about to agree, desperate to do so, when her gaze flicked to Viola out of habit. The expression on Viola’s face was so sad

that Constance felt something awaken inside her.

I abandoned Constance enough last night. I cannot do it again this afternoon.

"Mr. Bennett, I—" She was about to refuse him, in the gentlest way she could think of, when Jane answered for her.

"I'm sure she would be delighted, Mr. Bennett," Jane said quickly, taking the flowers out of her hands. "Come, Constance, let me get some water for these. It is a beautiful day, and you would enjoy the promenade, would you not?"

Constance knew she could not refuse now without appearing rude.

"Yes, I would like that very much."

"Excellent." The smile that spread across Mr. Bennett's face in response was breathtaking, removing any worries Constance had felt in accepting him. "Well, I must go, I have errands to run this morning,

but I look forward to this afternoon, Miss Constance." He bowed and turned to leave, then hesitated. "Oh, I nearly forgot, forgive me." He turned back this time and directed his gaze to Viola. "The Marquess of Salisbury will be at the promenade too, Miss Viola. He hopes you will join him."

Viola's jaw had dropped in complete surprise.

"She would like nothing more, I am sure," Jane once again answered for her daughter, ignoring the glare Viola cast her way.

"Then it is settled. Good day to you all, and I shall see you later. Miss Constance." He offered her one more bow, holding her gaze just enough to send a spark of excitement up her spine before he took his leave.

It was a few minutes later when Archibald came into the room, asking what had taken place with their caller. Constance was distracted, fussing with the white roses that had now been placed in a vase. It was only her father's sharp tone that tore her attention away.

“A promenade?” He looked at Constance. “You agreed to a promenade with Mr. Bennett?”

“Well, Mother agreed on my behalf,” Constance tried to point out.

“Constance, a word please.” Archibald walked straight to the doors that led onto the garden. Constance followed quickly, not missing the concerned look of her mother or the surprised look of Viola.

As the two of them stepped outside, Archibald closed the glass doors and hurried her a little distance down the grass.

“Constance, I know I must phrase this delicately, but I am struggling to do so,” he accepted, his voice weary. “So you must forgive me my bluntness. I heartily disapprove of you going on this promenade.”

“Excuse me?” Constance felt her heart leap in her chest in fear, showing just how badly she did wish to go and meet Mr. Bennett.

“You are the younger daughter, Constance,” he continued, lowering his voice and casting a glance to the glass doors of the parlor. Constance looked too, seeing both Jane and Viola staring at them. “You know your mother; her animation and excitement are not something I can calm easily, but you have more reason about you than your mother has. You must accept Viola should marry first.”

“I do, Father,” she hurried to explain. “Believe me, I wholeheartedly accept it. It is why I refused so many offers to dance last night, and yes, I am also hardly ignorant to my mother’s excitement. Let me put your mind at rest about this afternoon though. Mr. Bennett did not just come to offer an invitation to me. He also issued an invitation on behalf of the Marquess of Salisbury to *Viola.*”

“He did?” Archibald’s lips quirked into a small smile.

“Yes, Father. Viola has a potential suitor! Is this not great news? Please tell me you’ll permit us to go.” Constance was amazed by the desperation within her to have his blessing.

Please, do not stop me from seeing Mr. Bennett.

"Of course." Archibald's smile grew larger. "And yes, this is great news indeed." Then he stepped toward her and dropped his voice further. "Look out for Viola this afternoon then, Constance."

"Look out for her?" Constance mused. "I always do, but I fear Viola needs a little more confidence, Father," she confessed quietly.

"Viola has confidence when she is speaking to those she trusts." Archibald shrugged. "That is plain for me to see and does not concern me."

"It doesn't?" Constance frowned in surprise.

"Of course not." Archibald shook her head. "All she needs is the right man who will earn her trust first. Then he'll see who Viola really is."

Constance rather liked this idea. She looked back at the glass doors to see Viola's face with that same distant expression now back

in place.

Chapter 8

Thomas

As Thomas watched the streets of London fly past the windows of his carriage, he was almost jittery with excitement. Seeing the way Miss Constance's face had lit up when he delivered the white roses to her had had a startling effect. Seeing that smile in those pretty features, he rather expected himself capable of doing anything just to see it again.

As the townhouses flicked by, taking Thomas closer and closer to Antony's house, he thought back to the ball the night before. After the whist game with Antony, they had stepped into the main ballroom again, and it had not escaped Thomas' notice that he was not the only gentleman interested in Miss Constance. Far from it.

Though she appeared to turn down many men, preferring to stay at her sister's side rather than dance, she did accept a few others, and there was one amongst the group whose gaze lingered on her long after their dance.

The Marquess of Devonshire.

Thomas knew the man and had seen him more than once at gambling halls through the years. It was hardly a secret that the two of them had no liking for one another. Thomas found the Marquess proud and unkind, not that they had ever had an argument or a cross word between them. It was more the fact that they chose to practically ignore each other's presence, knowing they would not be natural friends. Thomas was also aware that the Marquess' pride meant he had few friends outside of the particularly high and noble circles he liked to mix with. Thomas, set to be just a baron, clearly did not meet his criteria.

Already disposed to dislike the man, seeing the way the Marquess watched Constance avidly through the night went from niggling at Thomas to making his blood boil by the end of the ball. It was far from an admiring glance or two, no . . . there was something else to it entirely. If Thomas were not mistaken, the best word he could think of to describe that look was *obsessive.*

Knowing the Marquess had danced with Miss Constance, set his hands upon her, and twirled her around the floor made a jealousy

Thomas did not know he was capable of rear its head. It was potent and surprisingly ugly to feel.

He tried to shake off the feeling. He did not have anything to worry about with the Marquess. He had seen that Miss Constance did not return his smiles or long looks, though she frequently offered such smiles to Thomas through the evening. During their second dance, it was plain to see she was more than just flattered by his attentions.

She is affected by me too.

There was something about the Marquess of Devonshire's pursuit that had Thomas concerned, though.

He is set to be a duke someday. How can I compete with that?

Thomas knew that he would want the best for his daughter, if he ever were so lucky to be a father. If he had two men calling, offering to marry that daughter, one set to be a baron with a reputation for being a rake and another set to be a duke with great wealth and more than one estate to his name, it was easy to know which gentleman he

would choose. The thought that he could lose someone as sweet-natured as Miss Constance because of the lack of a grand title made him shift uncomfortably in his seat.

His thoughts came to a sharp halt at the same time as the carriage. The footman opened the door, allowing Thomas to jump down and hurry to the doorstep of Antony's house.

And it was a fine townhouse indeed! As the Marquess of Salisbury, Antony owned more than one property, including this grand building that stretched up three white-pillared floors. He also owned an estate in the Wiltshire plains, deep in the countryside, a house Thomas had visited many times over the years. He knew Antony preferred it infinitely to the townhouse right in front of him.

Looking up at the frontage of the pillared building, Thomas did not agree with his friend. He much preferred the town to the country.

Once his knock at the door was answered, the butler showed him quickly through the house and into a glasshouse at the rear of the building. Stepping inside, he had to pull at the cravat around his neck,

stifled by the sudden heat that engulfed the glass structure.

“Antony? Are you in here?” he called between the tall ferns and great climbing flowers.

“At the back!” Antony called back, urging Thomas to follow his voice.

“Well, you are an eccentric, Antony. Most men welcome guests in their study, but you welcome them in a glasshouse!” Thomas laughed as he found his friend at the far end. He was sitting in a wicker chair with a newspaper on his lap and a cup of coffee in his hand.

“My study is full of dark wood and only has one painting of a small hill in Wiltshire in it. It is far from the most pleasant place to be, whereas this . . .” He gestured with a smile at his surroundings, urging Thomas to look between the banana plants, the sprawling agaves, and the lime trees. “Is infinitely superior. Here I do not have to look at a painting of nature; it is already here.”

“Some days I think you could be quite happy to retire to your

country estate forever," Thomas said as he took the proffered wicker seat beside Antony. "If you ever do, you know I would buy this house off you."

"I do know," Antony said, shaking his head. "But I fear this hothouse would not be well looked after under your care, so my answer is still a firm no." These words caused Thomas to laugh and sit back in his chair. "Coffee?"

"Yes please," Thomas agreed.

"Well, you do look happy today," Antony said, frowning slightly. "Can I ask after the source of your mirth? Or if I just guessed a young lady's name, would I be correct?"

"You would be," Thomas replied, laughing again as he picked up his coffee. "I called on Miss Constance this morning and asked her to the promenade this afternoon."

"You waste no time." Antony raised his dark eyebrows. "Continue at this rate and you'll be proposing in a fortnight."

“I will take a little more care than that.” Thomas shook his head, but remembering Miss Constance’s smile from that morning when she saw the roses, he didn’t see much reason to dally.

Is there any harm in pursuing Miss Constance as a future wife?

The idea took hold, and he became more and more comfortable with it.

“Then I wish you luck in your endeavor,” Antony said, picking up his paper, underneath which was another scandal sheet. “Is there a reason you’ve brought this particular bit of news to my door?”

“Ah, yes.” Thomas hesitated and picked up the scandal sheet, mostly so he would have something for his hands to fidget with. “About that . . .”

Antony arched a single brow, looking at him with suspicion.

“You are hardly ever nervous of saying anything . . . what have

you done, Thomas?" Antony tilted his head to the side.

"Done?" Thomas said innocently. "Nothing really."

"That is very leading." Antony was not convinced. "You are up to something. Come on, out with it!"

"I may have invited Miss Viola to the promenade as well on your behalf," Thomas said and suddenly lifted the scandal sheet in front of his face, hiding himself from Antony.

Within a moment, the sheet was snatched away, and Antony's look of shock met him.

"You did what?"

"It seemed like a good idea." Thomas shrugged, tempted to laugh at the look of outrage on Antony's face. "Don't look at me like that. I thought you liked Miss Viola last night."

"I did. I do, I mean." Antony struggled for words for a moment.

He was so rarely lost for words that it made Thomas frown. “I just prefer to be in control of my own social life.”

“Well, consider it a helping hand.” Thomas smiled again. “You will come, won’t you?”

“Of course I will, partly because to not go would be very rude indeed.” Antony tossed the scandal sheet back to him.

“Is that the only reason you aren’t refusing?” Thomas asked knowingly.

“Be quiet, Thomas, and read about yourself in the scandal sheet,” Antony said, gesturing down to it, making Thomas’ smile fall.

“I’m not in here again, am I?” He snatched it up and started flicking through the pages. “I can’t tell you how many of these I have burned over this last year.”

“I imagine you never would have needed to buy coal for how many sheets have been published with your name in them.” Antony’s

wit earned a dark glare from Thomas before he went back to searching for his name.

He quickly found the section that talked of him and the Marquess of Devonshire, referring only to Miss Constance by the rather perfect term, *the Sapphire of the Season*. It confirmed what he had suspected the night before.

The Marquess of Devonshire has his eye on Miss Constance.

He tossed the scandal sheet down on the nearest table, pulling a small smile from Antony.

“It’s easy for you to smile,” Thomas said quickly. “They never mention your name.”

“Yes, thank God.”

“Why is that?” Thomas frowned.

“Because unlike you, my friend, I have not lived a life that could

earn me the title of *'philanderer'*." Antony picked up the scandal sheet and turned back to the relevant page. "I keep my head down, and you know as well as I that these sheets prefer to talk of people who are much more interesting than myself."

"Just like gossip?" Thomas asked.

"Just so. They usually talk of those who are louder and have much bolder lifestyles, rather than the quiet ones." Antony paused on the section, clearly reading it again. "Well, I say usually. Miss Viola strikes me as being the anomaly to that rule."

"True. A quieter woman I have yet to meet, and yet she is talked of very much." Thomas could see his words made Antony shift in his seat, apparently uncomfortable with the idea. "Pursue Miss Viola, and you might find your own name in one of these scandal sheets soon."

Antony looked up, with his eyes wide, evidently disliking such an idea.

"My personal life is private, Thomas. I won't let it be splayed

across a paper like this." Antony gestured down to it.

"How strange, that is what I once thought as well," Thomas explained, sitting back in his chair and sipping the coffee again. "Once I am married, do you think they will stop writing about me?"

"Most likely," Antony agreed. "As long as you stay loyal to your wife's bed."

"Antony! I have every intention of doing so." Thomas was hardly surprised by the accusation, more that it had come from his friend's lips.

"Thomas, I know you would be. You've been a loyal friend to me over the years, and with the right woman, I do not doubt you would be loyal to her too," he assured, leaning forward. "I am simply trying to warn you of what the scandal sheets may lie about once you *are* married."

"So, you are saying I might have to throw many more of these things into the fire yet?" Thomas sighed at the idea.

“I’m afraid so.” Antony looked back down at the sheet. “It speaks very highly of your potential new wife.”

“About that.” Thomas leaned forward too, earning Antony’s gaze. “Tell me truthfully, am I being a fool here?”

“What do you mean?”

“Well.” Antony pointed at the paper. “You see what they say of the Marquess of Devonshire. Do you think any hope of earning Miss Constance’s hand is foolish of me? When she has a potential duke as a suitor?”

Antony paused before answering, clearly considering his reply in some detail. It was part of why Thomas trusted his old friend so much, and why they had stayed close through the years. Antony would give a serious and considered answer once asked. He would not reply with outpourings of reassurance if he had doubts on a subject.

“In truth,” Antony started, shifting in his seat, “if the Marquess

were another man, I could sit here and easily say that a father would be more likely to give his blessing to a future duke over a future baron."

"That's what I thought." Thomas grimaced at hearing the words.

"Wait before you get in a huff." Antony smiled. "I am not done yet. I saw the way Mrs. Henderson was fussing over Miss Constance last night. I do not believe she would push her daughter into marrying any man she did not care for, out of fear of her being unhappy. To speak perfectly plainly, you and I know the Marquess of Devonshire to be one of the vainest and most conceited gentlemen of our acquaintance. In fact, I would go so far as to not call him a gentleman at all."

"So I should have hope?" Thomas asked, smiling again.

"I see no reason to doubt it." Antony returned the smile and lifted his coffee cup, as though he were toasting with a fine wine. "To your future, Thomas. I wish you the best of luck in obtaining the wife that you want."

Thomas chinked his cup with Antony's, pleased by his words.

"Then I wish you the same thing," Thomas said, sipping from his drink. "And let us hope Miss Viola's quietness can be overcome enough for you to get to know her."

"Thomas." Antony shook his head, almost looking disappointed in him. "You clearly do not understand the lady at all."

"Why do I feel as if I have said something very wrong?" Thomas asked, confused.

"It doesn't matter." Antony stood. "Come on, let us find something to eat for luncheon. If I am to attend a promenade you have arranged on my behalf, I best not be late."

Thomas jumped to his feet too, buoyed by Antony's words.

Perhaps the future I want has not been taken by the Marquess of Devonshire yet.

Chapter 9

Viola

Viola kept adjusting her dress as she stared into the mirror in the entrance hall. It was a simple yet elegant day dress, cream in color, and fitted high on her waist, flattering her neckline. She knew very well it was perfectly pleasant, but looking at it now, she wished she could wear the bold dresses she saw the last time she had gone to the modiste.

"Are you ready, Viola?" Constance's voice surprised her, urging her to turn and see her sister descending the stairs.

She is so beautiful!

Viola couldn't help the envy that sparked inside of her at the sight of her sister. Constance was wearing a bold green dress, complimenting her hair in a way that was quite stunning. With no marks nor blemishes upon her skin, she was the perfect picture of youth and beauty.

As Constance smiled at her, Viola smiled back, willing color to

her cheeks.

I cannot be jealous of her. What kind of sister would I be then?

"Viola?" Constance said again, making her realize she hadn't yet answered.

"Yes, I'm ready." Viola nodded, though in truth she would have loved to go back to her painting. The idea of taking part in this promenade was making her hands shake. She had no doubt that people would be staring at her, whispering and pointing. The only reason she had accepted to go was because Constance was going with Mr. Bennett, and the idea of Constance and Mr. Bennett alone in such a way was too much to bear. "Constance, there's something I need to say before we go."

"Yes?" Constance reached her side and looked at her with eagerness, yet the words faltered on Viola's lips before she could say them.

It was as though an argument was brewing within her. A small

voice was shouting that she should tell Constance how she felt. Be completely open with her and just tell her the truth.

I like Mr. Bennett.

Yet another part of her stopped her. This voice was louder than the other.

What would I be doing for my sister's happiness if I told her?

"Nothing, it doesn't matter." Viola attempted a smile and brushed off the thoughts.

"All right," Constance replied, although she didn't look convinced. She offered Viola her arm. Viola took it and together the two of them walked toward the door, heading to the carriage that was waiting outside. Behind them, one of their maids, Judith, joined them, ready to chaperone the promenade. "You can tell me anything, Viola. You know that."

"I do." Viola nodded, though it was a lie.

I cannot tell you this.

As they climbed into the carriage, with Judith behind them, and set off, Viola's eyes continued to watch Constance. She did not miss how her younger sister was staring out of the carriage window, with an almost wistful look on her face, something that was quite dream-like. Yet asking Viola to be open in front of the company of their chaperone for the day might be a step too far.

"Penny for your thoughts," Viola said, trying to summon some animation.

"Ah." Constance looked back at her, with her smile very wide. "I think only of one person." She took Viola's hands and brought the two of them together, in a sisterly position. "It is high time I confessed something to you, Viola."

"Yes?"

"For only one man has occupied my thoughts for some time

now," Constance admitted, giggling as well.

Please do not say Thomas Bennett. Say anyone but him, I beg of you!

"Who?" Viola asked with full interest.

"Mr. Thomas Bennett." At Constance's words, Viola felt as though a knife had been driven into her heart.

"You barely know him," Viola said quickly.

"I know, yet so much has changed in that time," Constance was giddy with happiness. "It's as though since we danced last night at the ball . . . something happened between us."

"What happened?" Viola frowned, not liking her sister's words at all.

"As though a barrier went down between us. That barrier we all wear, the need for formality and reserve." Constance rolled her eyes at the idea. "I feel that I truly spoke to him, that I saw the real him.

When he appeared this morning with those roses, oh, Viola!" She squeezed her hand animatedly. "I thought my heart would beat so hard it would jump free of my chest!"

"It would have made quite a mess," Viola teased, causing Constance to laugh.

"Oh, I love your wit." Constance calmed her laughter. "I guess with what everyone has been saying about his roguish reputation, I thought last night may have all been in my imagination, but seeing him this morning with those roses told me it was not. That he was just as affected as I was. I don't think I've ever felt this kind of happiness before. I'm quite jittery with it, as though I won't be calm until I see him again." Constance laughed at herself.

Viola froze with her mouth parted, grappling to think of something to say to her sister. She was pleased her sister was so happy, of course she was, but the cause of all that happiness was . . . it was too much to bear.

"You feel things rather quickly, Constance," Viola attempted a

warning tone.

“I suppose I do, but does that really matter?” Constance was looking at her, clearly waiting for an answer to her question.

Any man could be the source of this happiness for you. Why did you have to take the one man I had pinned my hopes on?

“You should be careful,” Viola continued with her warning. “He does not have the reputation of a rake for nothing, sister.” She reasoned she was doing what any good older sister would do, protecting her best friend in the world from someone who could break her heart. “For all you know, he could be playing an act toward you. It could all be a performance! Do not give your heart away lightly, Constance. Be a little more careful with it.”

She could see her words had not been received well. Constance was frowning. All trace of her previous happiness had gone.

“It seems you have had quite a change of heart toward Mr. Bennett overnight.” Constance’s voice was surprisingly sharp. It took

Viola so much by surprise that she removed her hand from her sister's.

"What do you mean?" She focused on straightening the creases in her skirt.

"Last night you defended Mr. Bennett, saying we should give him the benefit of the doubt. Do you suddenly think ill of the man?" Constance was speaking with some force.

"It is not that—" Viola said with raised eyebrows at the strength of her sister's words.

"Then what is it?" Constance asked, her eyes wide.

It's that I think too well of the man. This can only end in heartbreak for one of us.

She opened her mouth, but before she could think of a lie to tell her sister, the carriage came to a stop. They had arrived at Hyde Park.

Viola watched as Constance turned her face to the window, her

smile suddenly back in place after catching sight of someone outside. Constance descended quickly from the carriage, barely waiting for the footman's help in getting down. Viola followed much more slowly, her stomach knotted so tight that she felt sick. Behind her, Judith descended too.

As Viola stepped out into the sunshine, she adjusted her bonnet, wishing it had a greater rim so that she could hide her scar with it, but it was no use. On such a bright day, she would be on show for everyone to see.

As she looked up, she found Mr. Bennett was beside Constance, and they were already talking together. The Marquess of Salisbury was walking toward her, and before Viola could think of a way to insert herself into the conversation between Mr. Bennett and Constance, the Marquess was before her, bowing.

"Good day, Miss Viola." He smiled as he bowed. The depth of his voice surprised Viola enough to look away from her sister and Mr. Bennett.

“Good day, my lord.” She curtsied, thinking of the strange conversation that had taken place between her and the Marquess the night before. As she stood straight, she lifted a hand to the hair falling free of her bonnet and adjusted a loose strand so that it fell across her cheek. “I was surprised by your invitation,” she clawed for some words.

In truth, she had been astonished by it, but had since been too consumed by thoughts of Mr. Bennett to linger on the Marquess’ reasons for extending the invitation.

“Yes.” The Marquess smiled as he extended her arm to her. “I was a little surprised myself.”

“I beg your pardon?” she asked in surprise as she took his arm. He began to lead her down a path through the center of Hyde Park. They followed Mr. Bennett and Constance at a distance, with Judith walking between the two groups. Viola would have been glad to have increased their pace and quickly caught up with the others, but the Marquess seemed intent on walking slowly.

“I am afraid it is time for a little confession, Miss Viola, for I do not wish to lie to you.” His words intrigued her enough to look away from the retreating figures of Constance and Mr. Bennett.

“A confession?” she repeated.

“It was Thomas who extended this invitation to you. The whole outing was by his design,” he accepted.

Hearing these words gutted Viola even more. She attempted to remove her arm from the Marquess’, but she found his arm tighten around hers, refusing to let it go.

“Miss Viola—”

“There is no need to explain, my lord.” She kept her eyes on the ground. “I am quite used to people not vying for my company. If my invitation and your wish to be here is something reminiscent of *The Taming of the Shrew,* then I must beg to leave now—”

“I see my attempt not to lie to you has been taken in the wrong

way entirely." He chuckled to himself and shook his head.

"Oh?" She looked up at him in surprise.

"Though I did not extend the invitation myself, that does not mean I am disappointed by it," he said calmly, returning his dark eyes to her. She was amazed by the depths within those eyes and for a minute said nothing. She just stared back up at him as he led her forward again down the path. "And believe me, though *The Taming of the Shrew* is an enjoyable play, I would never compare you to the forceful character that is Katherina. Neither do I believe Thomas asked me to come just to bring someone who could talk with you."

"Then, why are you here?" she asked with raised eyebrows. He returned her gaze, the corner of his lips turning up slightly.

"If I told you I enjoyed our conversation last night and wanted another, would you believe me?" He brought their walk to a brief pause, waiting for her to answer.

"I do not know." She frowned, pulling a small laugh from him.

“Not many people wish to speak to me.”

“Then I must endeavor to persuade you I am telling the truth. Come.” He led her again. “I was intrigued as to our discussion last night about art. Your mother mentioned your paintings too. You said you preferred landscapes.”

“That I do.” Viola nodded, barely noticing that she was no longer glancing Constance’s way.

“What landscapes do you paint?” he asked.

She pursed her lips together for a few minutes, thinking of her reply. It was not something she usually discussed with anyone other than Constance, but when she found the Marquess looking down at her, his face showing eagerness to hear an answer, she found the words came easily.

“Places I’ve been,” she said quickly. “When I was younger, my father used to take us on lots of trips around the countryside. There are certain views from each trip I remember, and I find them turning

up in my paintings again and again."

"Such as?" he encouraged.

"Lyme Regis, Derbyshire, the Wiltshire plains." She could have gone on.

"Ah, all those white chalk horses on hills?" he asked with a smile.

"Yes, just so."

"Wiltshire has many beauties to it," he agreed with a nod, "but you have not seen all that Wiltshire has to offer until you have seen Stonehenge."

"I have never been."

"Then you must go someday," he said, surprising her.

"Must I?" She found a small laugh falling from her lips.

“Of course.” He laughed too. “As we said last night, landscapes tell stories that no portrait ever could. Someday if you stand before the Stonehenge monument and paint it, believe me, Miss Viola, you will find you can trace with your eyes the hundreds of stories that could be told from such a view.”

“You have seen it then?” She was excited by the idea and could not keep the excitement out of her voice. She lifted her head to him completely and the hair that had been covering her scar fell away.

“More than once,” he said. “It is a beauty indeed, but not my favorite view in the whole of England.”

“What is?” she asked, watching as he tilted his head up a little, staring at the park around them as though he were no longer looking at this busy park full of promenading ladies and gentlemen, but standing somewhere out in the countryside.

“There’s a place called Marloes Sands in Pembrokeshire. If you ever wish to feel as if you’re standing on the edge of the world, Miss

Viola, with just the sea spray, the wind, and the rock stocks stopping you from falling off the edge, take a trip there. You'll be amazed by it."

Viola smiled as they walked on together.

"Then I would dearly like to see it someday," she admitted.

"Tell me more of your paintings, for I would like to see them sometime." The Marquess led her down a new path, away from Mr. Bennett and Constance. To her surprise, she didn't even glance back to the other couple. She was too busy looking at the Marquess. Behind her, she was aware that Judith followed them. Thomas and Constance were heading into a busier part of the park, and Judith was clearly keen to keep both couples within sight.

Why have I told him so much? I never reveal this part of myself to anyone.

Yet, on Viola spoke. She told him of her last painting of the Wiltshire plains and the white chalk horse in the distance, talking at

such ease that she startled herself.

As she spoke, she traced the Marquess' eyes as he watched her and the curve of his lips as he smiled.

Could it be . . . am I attracted to the Marquess?

Chapter 10

Constance

Constance tried to calm her laughter again. She and Mr. Bennett had been walking and talking at length for some time now, and he had a startling ability to make her laugh. They also had many common interests, which amazed her.

She half expected he could have told her a few untruths . . . as a rogue, surely, he was well-practiced at telling such lies? Knowing a woman would fall for any man who was so fascinated by her own interests? Yet she could not find a lie in anything Mr. Bennett said.

On the contrary, I think he is telling me the complete truth.

"Haydn?" she repeated in surprise.

"Precisely," he said as he drew her to a stop on a bridge that overlooked a section of the river in Hyde Park. They stood together, arm in arm leaning on the bridge, with his blue eyes bright in the strong sunlight of the day. "I know it is perhaps a controversial preference. I cannot tell you how many times I have professed my

favorite composer to be Haydn and been met with a chorus of angry voices who said that Beethoven is the superior composer."

"Well, I would stand in your corner and argue on your side quite happily." Constance smiled. "For I much prefer Haydn and find Beethoven's pieces are so much talked of that they can be quite dull at times."

"Dull? Ha!" Mr. Bennett laughed. "Even I have never stretched so far as to call him dull."

"Listen to as many recitals as I have and you will be as bored by the repetition as I," she said with confidence, seeing the way her words made Mr. Bennett lean toward her, smiling.

"Then I hope we can attend such a recital together some time," Mr. Bennet said, leaning on the bridge railing. "And we can sit together at the back of the auditorium, praising Haydn and commenting on Beethoven's dullness."

"Then I look forward to it." Constance smiled, just as her eyes

slipped behind them to further up the path.

Viola and the Marquess of Salisbury had taken a different path through the park and were now catching up with them. Constance smiled as she examined the expressions of the two of them. Whatever the Marquess had said, he appeared to have brought quite a dazzling smile to Viola's cheeks. In fact, she appeared relaxed with her head tilted up toward him; she was almost . . . radiant.

Constance turned on the bridge to watch them properly as they hesitated nearby, looking at the river together, with Judith trailing behind them. She had never seen her sister look that way before.

"Your friend must be quite the conversationalist," she said to Mr. Bennett, earning his gaze.

"Ah, well, Antony certainly is pleasing company," Mr. Bennett agreed with a nod and then leaned toward her, whispering confidentially. "And I believe him to have a particular admiration for your sister." Constance couldn't stop the thrill that echoed through her body at the closeness of Mr. Bennett. She felt a shiver of excitement

shoot up her spine before she calmed herself with a deep breath and focused on his words.

"Are you telling me your friend is smitten with my sister?" Constance looked at Viola and the Marquess again.

"Smitten? That I do not know, but from how he was talking of Miss Viola this morning," Mr. Bennett said, nodding slowly in thought, "there is certainly already an attachment there."

Constance smiled again as she watched Viola laugh at something the Marquess said. A group of women passed by close to Viola and the Marquess and even from Constance's position a little distance away, she could surmise clearly enough who their topic of conversation was. They were sending furtive glances toward Viola and one lady even had the audacity to point in her direction.

Constance's smile faded immediately.

"You are upset, Miss Constance?" Thomas' voice was full of concern as he took her arm in his again. She felt a shiver of pleasure

at his touch, but she gestured toward the group all the same.

"It seems the gossips of the ton are at work again," she said quietly. "They never leave Viola alone."

Viola must have grown aware of the group as she tilted her head downward and began to adjust her hair, fiddling with it until it covered her cheek. The Marquess of Salisbury saw her do this and glanced toward the group before he led Viola away. Whatever he said to her, it must have been something to point out the folly of the ladies, because Viola smiled in response and glanced their way too. Slowly, the two of them began to walk toward Constance and Mr. Bennett's position on the bridge.

"Antony seems to have done a good job of raising her spirits," Mr. Bennett said.

"Not entirely." Constance smiled and shook her head, earning Mr. Bennett's gaze again.

"She is smiling." He frowned, then tilted his head to the side.

“Why do I feel as though I have missed something?”

“I see we must train you in the art of observation, Mr. Bennett,” she teased as she nodded her head toward her sister. “Take a closer look. Whereas a minute ago Viola had her head up and was smiling freely, now her chin is tilted down and she is using her hair to hide her face.”

“Ah, you are right,” Mr. Bennett agreed. “It seems Antony and I must work to improve ourselves. He must get better at making your sister feel at ease, and I must improve myself in observing human behavior.”

“A little practice and you will be an expert.” Constance smiled, though it faltered when her eyes followed the group of ladies. Even though they had now moved on, it was evident who they continued to talk of.

“The ton can be a cruel lot. Gossips have no heart and see the lives of others as but a drama to talk of. As though our lives were works of fiction other than fact,” Mr. Bennett said, clearly with more

feeling behind those words than was just applicable to Viola.

"I am sorry. You have suffered by their hands too," Constance said, squeezing softly the crook of his elbow in comfort.

"That I have," he agreed. "Even this morning you will have seen we were mentioned in one of the *scandal sheets*," he said the last words in a whisper, as though they were a great scandal indeed.

"Well, *you* were mentioned," she teased. "They did not mention me by name."

"Not yet, but there was clearly no doubt it was you they were speaking of." He took her hand out of his arm and lifted it to his face. Constance held her breath as he paused, his lips inches from the back of her hand. "The Sapphire of the Season. Only one lady they could have possibly been referencing." He held her eyes as he kissed the back of her hand.

"If anyone sees you kissing my hand in such a way, we'll be back in the scandal sheet before sunrise." She giggled, breathing again as

he lowered her hand.

“You are perhaps right, along with another man’s name.” Mr. Bennett sighed as his eyes looked past her to someone approaching. “Who seems to be coming this way.”

“I’m sorry?” Constance said in confusion.

“It seems another admirer of yours is making a beeline for us.” Mr. Bennett nodded behind her, and Constance turned to see the Marquess of Devonshire walking their way, with his eyes fixed on her.

Oh, please do not say you are coming this way to talk to me!

“It seems your peaceful walk is about to be disturbed,” the Marquess of Salisbury’s voice surprised Constance. She turned back to see Viola and the Marquess had reached their side.

“He could be just passing by,” Constance said quickly, earning a sharp look from the three of them.

“From where his eyes are pinned to, Miss Constance, there is no doubt he is coming to talk to you,” Mr. Bennett explained, taking her arm in his again just as the Marquess of Devonshire reached them.

“Good day.” Lawrence offered a bow as he reached them, clearly being careful to direct it to Constance herself. “Mr. Bennett, may I steal away Miss Constance for a few minutes?”

“That is the lady’s decision,” Mr. Bennett replied.

Constance opened her mouth, ready to spurn him. She had no wish to be in the presence of a man as conceited as the Marquess of Devonshire when much more pleasant company was to be had with Mr. Bennett.

“I’m sure she would be delighted to accompany you, my lord,” Viola said quickly.

Constance flicked her head toward her sister, so stunned that her lips parted and closed for a minute, uncertain what to say. Could she contradict her sister? Surely, she could not without appearing

incredibly rude!

She offered an apologetic glance to Mr. Bennett before looking at the Marquess of Devonshire and nodding.

“Yes, of course, but just for a few minutes,” she added the caveat, hoping it would give her a reason to escape quickly.

As the Marquess offered his arm, she reluctantly released Mr. Bennett’s. She felt the loss of his warm touch acutely before taking the Marquess’s arm. Even through his tailcoat, his arm in hers was not as warm. In fact, it was quite cold.

As he led her away, with Judith following them, Constance kept glancing back at her sister, Mr. Bennett, and the Marquess of Salisbury, who were deep in conversation.

“May I offer some advice, Miss Constance?” the Marquess asked, though he did not look at her as he spoke.

“If you wish.” Constance kept her voice cold, feeling thoroughly

agitated at the turn of events.

“Put some distance between yourself and Mr. Bennett,” he said quickly. “Your reputation would suffer from being associated with such a rogue.”

She was tempted to say something in a strong rebuke, to put the Marquess of Devonshire in his place for daring to speak so out of turn when the matter had nothing to do with him, but he was talking again, not even giving her a chance to reply.

“I greatly enjoyed our dance last night, Miss Constance . . .” he began prattling on, but the conversation did not once turn to her or her interests, and it stayed as far away from music as night was different from day. Moreover, the majority of his conversation was fixed on himself.

More than once as she listened to his monotonous monologue about himself, did she glance back to Viola, wondering why she had encouraged her to walk with the Marquess of Devonshire.

Why would you do this, Viola? Especially when I made my interest in Mr. Bennett clear!

Then she recalled the warning Viola had given her because of Mr. Bennett's reputation. Constance felt her mood grow darker and glummer as they walked together, thinking how poor the world was that the only man she cared for, the only man she truly wanted an attachment with, was labeled a "rake", and that because of that her connection with him was not welcome.

The world is not always a kind place.

She was pleased to see that Mr. Bennett had moved their group to intercept her later down the path. As she reached him, she thanked the Marquess of Devonshire, but made it abundantly clear she was to go back to Mr. Bennett.

"But, Miss Constance," he persisted. "There is much more of the park yet to explore."

"And I wish to explore it with the gentleman who has been

escorting me for most of the afternoon. Good day, my lord." She curtsied quickly and turned away, relieved as Mr. Bennett offered his arm again.

"Thank the lord you are back," he whispered to her as they walked off together.

"Believe me, I am just as grateful to be back," she replied with a smile, connecting their gazes. As the brightness of his blue eyes made her giddy, she had to look away, and she caught sight of Viola watching her.

Viola was not smiling. Indeed, there was no trace of humor or happiness in her features at all.

What has upset her now?

Chapter 11

Thomas

Thomas was torn. On one hand he was thrilled to have Constance back on his arm, to see her bright smile and those hazel eyes staring back at him, but he could not understand what Miss Viola had done.

Miss Viola must have known how much Constance was enjoying his company, so it did not make sense at all as to why she would encourage Constance to accept another man's invitation to walk together.

The dark glare that Viola had offered when Constance had rejoined him had not escaped Thomas' notice. He returned the glare for a moment before returning his full attention to Constance, deciding that the happiness written across her face was much more worth his thoughts.

It was only a minute later that he realized why Viola may have encouraged Constance to walk with the Marquess of Devonshire.

It is my reputation . . . she is trying to protect her younger sister from

a rogue. In her position, would I not do the same?

This realization made him lift his chin higher and grow bolder in his determination. If that were Viola's motivation, then he understood it completely. Yet he was neither the man the gossips spoke of, nor the cad he used to be. He was changing, moving into a new part of his life, and he wasn't going to let the suspicions of Viola or anyone else stop him. In time, he would prove himself to everyone, show them that he was pursuing Constance with honorable intentions, nothing else. It just might take a little time.

"Tell me," he whispered to Constance, drawing her forward and far away from her sister. "Is my reputation a concern for your family?"

"I see you noticed it too." Constance sighed. "For my sister, it would appear it may be a problem, but please, believe me, Mr. Bennett, I do not care for what others say." The strength of her words made his arm tighten warmly around hers. He brought his other hand up to cover hers that was placed on the crook of his elbow.

“You don’t?” he asked with hope.

“Of course not. You and I have talked much of gossip as of late. By now, I hope you know that I care naught for it. My opinion of you, I form from *knowing* you.” She held his gaze, her hazel eyes shining in the sunlight so brightly that they could have been the color of gold. “I will let no one else persuade me of anything else.”

Thomas felt as though he had never smiled so before. To have such a woman as Constance on his arm was pleasing enough, someone who shared his interests, was strikingly beautiful, and had such confidence in the way she carried herself that he was bewitched by her . . . it meant so much. Yet for Constance to be a woman who was so open minded, clearly kind, and indifferent to the follies of the ton that affected many ladies, was a rare thing. He did not want to leave her side again.

“You are a rare woman, Miss Constance, and were I not afraid of watching eyes, I would happily kiss your hand again for hearing you talk so sensibly.” He was pleased to see when she shared his smile, her cheeks blushing. “Then, as generously as you think toward me, I must

endeavor to make others think so as well."

"How do you mean?" she asked, tilting her head to the side and causing the curls of her dark auburn hair to fall delicately across her neck.

"I mean that I will prove to your sister and the rest of your family that I am not the man the scandal sheets have made of me. I merely share that man's name, but it is not what is in here." He thumped his chest with his hand, urging her to smile once more.

"You do not need to prove anything," she assured him.

"I think I do," Thomas said thoughtfully, glancing back to Viola and Antony once more.

The two of them were deep in conversation, and all evidence of the glare that had been on Viola's face was gone. She was smiling at Antony. Thomas strained to hear a little of their conversation and thought he could hear a few Renaissance master's names, but he dipped out of the discussion quickly. Whatever Antony had distracted

Viola with, he had wiped away that glare completely.

“I only wish you to be yourself,” Constance said in thought, drawing Thomas’ attention fully back to her.

“You do?” he asked.

“Of course.” She smiled up at him. “Proving yourself is an overrated thing,” she said boldly. “Be you, and in time my sister will see that the real you is someone worth knowing. That is all I ask.”

“Then I promise to give that to you.” He patted her hand in his arm and drew her forward again.

Together they circled the park, arm in arm, talking at length of music, of Haydn’s Sonatas and his famous piece, *The Seasons*. When their conversation turned to mutual acquaintances, Thomas was amazed to see that Constance held many of the opinions he did, sharing the same friends, which showed they appreciated the same values in people.

As they finished their turn through Hyde Park, reaching the carriages again, he felt something swell within him. There were two parts to this foreign feeling, something he had never known before.

Part of it was care and affection. He could not look at Constance with anything but a smile, yet the other part was sadness, for he knew that they would have to part and say goodbye within moments. He looked over his shoulder, relieved their chaperone was currently paying more attention to Antony and Miss Viola.

“There is something I wish to say to you, Miss Constance, but I fear that you will think me rather foolish,” he whispered to her, glancing back to ensure Antony and Viola were far out of earshot before continuing.

“Then feel at liberty to speak.” She looked up at him with open honesty in her face. “For if it is foolish, we can laugh at it together, and you do not need to feel ashamed.”

“Very well,” he agreed to the plan. “I am saddened to think that within a few minutes I will have to help you back into your carriage

and I will then have to ride away from you. There is my confession. So, tell me, is it very foolish to know that I will miss your company after so short a time of knowing you?"

"It is not foolish," she said, her voice deep and her wide eyes looking at him. "Sometimes people struggle to talk to one another so much that they cannot ever really get to know each other, even over a period of months. On the other hand, some people, when they can talk freely and openly, feel that a short amount of time is all that is needed to know each other."

"They talk as you and I do?" he asked with hope, waiting for her answer with butterflies in his stomach.

"Just so." She smiled, and he smiled too, feeling those butterflies flutter all the more.

"Then I take it I will not be the only one who will miss the other's company," he asked leadingly, whispering to her again.

"You are persistent." She laughed, but nodded all the same. "Yes,

I will miss your conversation too."

"Good." He sighed. "Though I am sad to cause you any sadness, I cannot help being happy that I am not alone in the feeling." He turned the two of them until they exited Hyde Park and drew near to the line of carriages that had pulled up, waiting for the ladies and gentlemen to part. As Thomas found Constance's coach, he brought them to a stop, allowing Antony and Viola time to catch up.

"Well, Miss Constance, I would dearly like to see you again in the next few days, if you are available?" he asked with hope.

"Then we won't have to miss each other for too long?" she asked with a smile.

"Just so." He nodded.

"In that case, I would like to see you too," she said as a small blush crept across her features, turning her nose and the tops of her cheeks bright pink.

Thomas got distracted by looking at those features, moving from admiring the color of her eyes to her pristine skin. He was too busy letting his eyes wander to notice someone at his side.

“Ah—em.” Antony clearing his throat brought him to his senses.

“Ah, Antony, there you are,” Thomas said quickly, trying to sound formal, as though his tender moment with Constance had not been interrupted.

“Yes, I realized you did not notice we were here.” Antony smiled. Had they been alone, Thomas would have given a tart reply, but as it was, he returned his focus to Constance instead, choosing to ignore his friend’s teasing.

“Well, what events are you to attend in the near future?” he addressed Constance. “Perhaps I will be so fortunate to see you at another of these.”

“Our next engagement is in a week’s time,” Constance explained, her mouth a little downturned.

A week! I cannot wait a week.

"Perhaps another promenade then?" he asked with hope. "For that we will not have to wait a week."

"Miss Viola and I have just been discussing the exhibition at Somerset house." Antony gestured down to Viola who seemed to be wearing a very impassive expression as she nodded in agreement with him. "It opens in four days' time. Perhaps we could all go together?"

"Somerset house?" Constance repeated in surprise. "I thought those tickets were hard to get hold of!"

"Apparently the Marquess here has connections that can ensure us such tickets," Viola said, raising her eyebrows.

"Well, Antony does seem to know someone from every influential business there is." Thomas smiled at him, earning some laughter from his friend.

“I maintain my business connections, Thomas. That is all.” He shook his head. “So what if I use those friends to obtain tickets for art exhibitions?”

“True, but was that not your reason for your trip to the Far East too?” Thomas asked, seeing the surprise this caused in Viola’s face.

“Art or business?” Viola asked, just as Antony looked down at her. He held her gaze as he gave his answer.

“Both.” He continued to hold her gaze until she looked down, apparently startled by the strength of that simple look.

“Now my friend has finished boasting of his business connections . . .” Thomas said teasingly.

“You were the one who mentioned them.” Antony laughed.

“The exhibition sounds like a fine idea, indeed.” Thomas looked back at Constance. “What do you say, Miss Constance?”

“I think it is a lovely idea,” she said quickly. “Then it is agreed. Somerset House in four days’ time.”

“Wonderful.” Thomas offered his hand to her as the footman opened the carriage door, and he helped her inside. He was aware that behind him Antony urged Viola to turn away, absorbing her in brief conversation. It gave Thomas just enough time to speak to Constance in private as she sat in the carriage and he stood in the doorway. “Four days’ time. At least my sadness will not last too long.”

“Nor mine,” she said softly. In the small amount of privacy they had, Thomas lifted her hand to his lips again and kissed the back.

“Until next time, Miss Constance.” Then he released her hand. The loss of her touch within his palm practically ached within him as he stepped back and allowed Antony to help Viola into the carriage too.

As the carriage pulled away, Thomas was afforded the perfect view of Constance’s great smile through the window, along with an animated wave. He waved back, aware of Antony’s silence at his side.

“You’re going to say something now, aren’t you?” Thomas twisted to look at him as the carriage turned at the end of the street and disappeared from view. Antony looked back at him, merely raising his eyebrows. “Come on, out with it!”

“I was merely going to thank you for inviting Viola on my behalf.” Antony shrugged.

“Indeed?” Thomas was a little surprised. He shifted between his feet, aware of how Antony had responded that morning when Thomas had brought up the topic of Viola’s reserved nature. He struggled to voice his concerns without treading on toes, so he opted for a general pleasantry. “You enjoyed her company then?”

“Very much.” Antony smiled as he turned his gaze down the street, looking in the direction of where the carriage had just disappeared.

“And you do not find the lady too . . .” Thomas faltered as Antony flicked his head back to him.

“Too what?” Antony asked, now raising just a single eyebrow.

“Nothing.” Thomas shook his head and changed his mind. “If I say anymore, I think I’ll regret it.” He laughed at himself.

“You probably would.” Antony laughed too. “I don’t think I’ll hear a word said against the lady now.”

As he walked off in the other direction, Thomas turned to follow him, his thoughts split between thinking of Constance’s beauty and wondering how the quiet Viola had managed to enrapture Antony with what must have been very few words indeed.

Chapter 12

Constance

The moment they lost sight of Mr. Bennett and the Marquess of Salisbury through the carriage window, Constance flicked her head toward Viola. The move was so sharp that she saw Viola flinch in surprise. She hardly cared that she was about to have an outburst in front of Judith; her shock and irritation were so great that she could not hold them in a minute longer.

"Viola? What were you thinking?" Constance could feel how alarmed her voice was. She tried to lower it, especially when she could see the surprise in Viola's face. Constance was never angry with her. It was always a rule not to be, but she was being sorely tested now.

"What do you mean?" Viola shifted in her seat.

"What do you think I mean!?" Constance could not calm herself. She twisted completely in the seat, fixing Viola with a glower. "You practically pushed me into the Marquess of Devonshire's arms this afternoon."

“It was not quite that, Constance. Do not be dramatic.” Viola shook her head.

“What you said . . .” Constance grappled for the right words. “It made it impossible for me to refuse, can’t you see that?”

“I suppose.” Viola shrugged her shoulders. “It was merely the polite thing to say. A pleasantry.”

“Couldn’t you see that I had no wish to walk with that man? You and I both know him to be a contemptible gentleman! His reputation! Few people indeed have kind things to say of him. Many know of his selfishness and his arrogance. Did I not tell you at length how tiresome his company was last night when we danced together? Viola, how could you do it?” Constance pleaded again.

“On our way to Hyde Park, you were saying we should not judge a man by his reputation.” Viola looked up at her, holding her gaze. The plainness of the logic left Constance tongue-tied for a moment.

“I do not like the gentleman!” she said again, her voice so firm that she could feel her body shaking with it.

“Constance, please, calm yourself.” Viola smiled and took her hand. The simple movement took some of the anger out of Constance’s body. She breathed deeply, trying to relax. “I am not saying you should suddenly fall in love with the Marquess of Devonshire—”

“I dearly hope you are not saying that!” Constance squeezed her hand.

“Release your hold a little, Constance, or your rings will leave dents in my hand.” Viola laughed, pointing down at their connection.

“I’m sorry,” Constance said somberly, softening the hold.

“All I was doing was encouraging you to consider your options,” Viola began slowly.

“My options?” Constance repeated. “How so?”

“The Marquess of Devonshire’s behavior could not be more readable.” Viola shook her head. “You know as well as I that he is particularly interested in you. Granted, the man’s reputation for being conceited is a poor one, but Mr. Bennett’s reputation is no better. In fact . . . it is rather worse.”

“You think I should refuse them both?” Constance bit her lip in thought.

“No,” Viola spoke calmly. “I just don’t think you should put all your eggs in one basket. Our mother was right this morning when she pointed out that the Marquess of Devonshire is to one day be a duke. He offers a very affluent and secure position indeed.”

“Life is not about affluence,” Constance scoffed.

“Very true,” Viola agreed, “but as your older sister, it is my responsibility to look out for your well-being.”

“Oh, Viola.” Constance crumpled, suddenly feeling an overwhelming sense of guilt for directing such anger at her sister. “I

know you are just looking out for me. I am sorry."

"You don't need to apologize," Viola assured with a smile. "All I ask is that you do not set your sights firmly on Mr. Bennett. Look to the Marquess of Devonshire. Any lady would be honored to be courted by a future duke."

These words made Constance's heart harden a little again. She held her sister's gaze, thinking carefully how to explain her feelings.

"Thank you, Viola, for looking out for me, and while I genuinely appreciate your effort to do so, I must speak plainly." She saw her words made Viola's smile vanish completely. "I find the Marquess of Devonshire to be one of the most conceited and selfish men I have ever met. In our walk together, he talked of nothing but himself. Dukedom or not, I have no interest in continuing to know that man. I especially have no interest in courting with him."

"So, you are determined to set your sights on Mr. Bennett?" Viola asked, her voice a little cold. "You will not be persuaded the Marquess of Devonshire is worth consideration?"

“No. At this moment, I think Mr. Bennett is superior to every other gentleman I have ever met. You should have heard the way he spoke. A true gentleman, he is. I have to tell you what he said about —” Constance was prepared to gush about Mr. Bennett and describe a long list of his virtues, but Viola cut her off.

“I understand, Constance. Mr. Bennett is the man for you.” Viola released her hand and turned away, looking out of the window.

Constance froze, keeping her body as still as a marble statue as she watched her sister keep her gaze firmly on the scenery beyond the window. She could not understand why Viola’s passion to see Constance so financially secure in her marriage would stretch this far.

Did I say something else to upset her?

Viola

Viola was struggling to stay calm. It was taking all her willpower not to lash out at Constance.

Of all the men in the world, you had to take the one I wanted. You could have had any man! Why did it have to be this one?

"Do not be angry at me, Viola," Constance pleaded at her side.

"I am not angry," Viola lied, not bothering to turn back to her.

"You look angry." Constance pouted.

"I am not," she persisted with the lie, still looking out the window.

"Then, perhaps we could talk of something else?" Constance begged with her, her voice turning soft and gentle. "Perhaps we could speak of the Marquess of Salisbury?"

Viola felt her jaw tighten, as though holding back words.

The Marquess . . .

She didn't know what to make of the man. She couldn't deny she

had greatly enjoyed his company. They had talked at length of travelling, of the beauties in the countryside, of his trip to the Far East, and, of course, of art! She had found herself more than once lifting her face to him completely, so lost in the conversation that she had forgotten her efforts to hide her scar from him.

"The Marquess seemed to enjoy your company very much." Constance was still talking, but Viola did not make an effort to reply.

He did seem to enjoy the conversation as much as I, but why did he come?

He was clearly trying to persuade her that he enjoyed her company and did not think of her scar, but she couldn't believe that. She didn't believe that of anyone. *Everyone* in this world treated her differently since she had gained that scar, even Constance. Of course, she did not begrudge her sister for the change. She loved her dearly and depended much on Constance's kindness over the years, but it did not change the fact that Constance would sometimes look at her with the same knowledge that she was an aberration.

They all look at me so.

"Did you like the Marquess?" With such a direct question from Constance, Viola could not avoid answering.

"I did," she agreed.

"Then you two could have a courtship!" Constance said with excitement.

"What? No!" Viola flicked her head back toward her sister, fearful that she had spoken such words in front of Judith. She did not want the staff to know her business.

The only man I have dreamed of courting is Mr. Thomas Bennett. It is his handsome looks I have thought so much of. Not of the Marquess of Salisbury's.

"No?" Constance looked saddened.

"I think of the Marquess as just a friend, Constance," Viola

explained quickly. “That is all.”

“But . . . you liked his company?” Constance frowned.

“Very much,” Viola agreed, looking away again.

“Then, would a courtship be so wrong?” Constance had hope in her voice, and Viola couldn’t bear the sound of it.

“The Marquess of Salisbury and I are not destined for one another. Of that I am quite certain.” Viola kept her chin high, refusing to look back at her sister.

“What makes you say that?” Constance’s voice was turning sadder with each statement they exchanged.

“Because you know as well as I that no man would look at me with courtship in mind.” Viola looked out of the window, adjusting her hair again so that it fell across her cheek.

“That’s not true,” Constance mumbled.

Clearly it is. For Mr. Bennett never even looked at me; he looked straight at you.

"The Marquess confessed to me that he came today because Mr. Bennett invited him. The Marquess did not extend an invitation to me himself." Viola turned briefly back to her sister, watching as her sister flinched in surprise.

"That can't be true." Constance shook her head.

"It is." Viola nodded. "The Marquess said he did not want to lie to me."

"Then I am sorry for it." Constance turned her eyes down to her lap.

The rest of the carriage journey passed in complete silence. Viola found her mind jumping between the Marquess of Salisbury and Mr. Bennett. Sometimes she thought of Mr. Bennett's blue eyes and his smile, other times she thought of the Marquess' laughter and what he

had said about his love for travelling. He was also a handsome man . . . those dark eyes seemed to follow her at all times as they walked through Hyde Park.

The moment they returned to the house, things were all a fluster. As they stepped inside, Jane was there, flapping and fussing around Constance, asking incessantly about her afternoon with Mr. Bennett and what they spoke of.

“Mother,” Viola’s voice cut into the conversation. “You must allow yourself to breathe between questions or Constance will not have a chance to answer them.” Her words brought Constance a laugh, but Viola could not share in the humor of her own jest.

As Jane dragged Constance into the drawing room, persisting in finding out every detail of the afternoon, Viola’s feet seemed to find their own path through the house. Before she realized where she had gone, she went to the library, and she opened the door with quite a thud.

To her surprise, at the back of the room was her father, who

looked up, jumping at the sound of the door.

“Is everything well, Viola?” he asked as she walked past him, heading toward a certain bookcase.

“Yes, Father,” she lied through gritted teeth as she searched through their collection of Shakespeare.

“How was your afternoon with the Marquess of Salisbury?” he asked as she pulled down the book she had searched for.

“It was pleasant enough.” She turned away and began to walk back out of the room.

“That is all?” he asked, with a note of disappointment in his voice.

“Yes, Father, that is all,” she replied as she closed the door again.

She hurried back up to her room, and once safe within its confines, she settled herself into an armchair she had placed to look at

the landscapes she had painted. There she opened *The Taming of the Shrew* and began to read at length. It was far from a portrayal of her world, for Katherina was a vastly different person from her. Yet just like her, Katherina was somewhat ostracized and ignored, and her younger and much more beautiful sister was preferred by every gentleman.

Viola lost herself in those pages and the exchange of wit between Katherina and her eventual love, Petruchio, but it was the opening scenes that struck her the most. For in those pages, she read of a woman who was an outcast, while a gentleman conspired to marry the younger sister by first distracting the older sister with another man.

Perhaps this is why the Marquess came today. He is intended as a distraction, to allow Mr. Bennett to pursue Constance.

She barely noticed when the first tear fell on the page of the book.

Chapter 13

Constance

Constance could barely sit still in the carriage. She was fiddling constantly, rearranging the sleeves of her pelisse and the reticule in her lap. The modiste had prepared a new dress for the occasion at her mother's instruction, and Constance couldn't be more pleased with it.

Pastel blue with lace trim, it was a stunning gown. Cinched high on her waist, just under her bust, she knew it was a fine thing indeed, and was impressed the modiste could pull it together in such a short amount of time.

"Don't you think it's beautiful, Viola?" she asked her sister again, turning for her approval in the carriage. Opposite them, she saw Judith nod in agreement, once again their chaperone for the day. She played with the skirt, urging Viola to look down at the gown.

"Yes, very beautiful," Viola said quietly. "Pretty as a picture."

Constance smiled when Viola used their old phrase, yet when she lifted her eyes to Viola's face, Constance saw she was not smiling.

“Is something wrong?” Constance asked as she stopped fiddling with the gown and laid her hands still.

“Nothing, I am just deep in thought,” Viola said succinctly before turning her gaze back out of the carriage window. The words were not spoken cruelly, but they were cool and distanced. It had been the same the last few days; Viola was not offering the same warmth Constance was accustomed to.

Constance watched Viola turn away, her body freezing as a thought occurred to her. Today was the day they were heading to Somerset House to see the exhibition with Mr. Bennett and the Marquess of Salisbury. Constance had been so caught up in her own excitement for the day and seeing Mr. Bennett again that she had barely given a moment’s thought to how difficult such an event could be for Viola.

Constance hung her head as a thought struck. Of course, Viola was unsettled. Somerset House would be a busy place, and Viola never liked such places, for they always had more gossips.

Constance felt a wave of guilt as she looked down at her dress again and moved the soft silk until it passed delicately and smoothly across her knees, thinking over the last few days.

As soon as she had told Jane of their upcoming engagement at Somerset House, Jane had jumped into action, dragging the two of them to the modiste. Yet looking down at what they were both wearing, it was only just occurring to Constance that *she* had been bought a new dress, and Viola had not.

The guilt of having not given due consideration to Viola's feelings about attending such a busy event was now coupled with shame of not having recognized the signs of their mother's bias once more.

I owe her an apology.

"Viola, there's something I must say to you." Constance turned to her sister. Viola looked back, but her features were vacant, with no smile in sight.

“Yes?” she said.

“I . . .” The apology faltered on her lips for a moment. “I thought you would be more excited about the exhibition. Did you not wish to see it?”

“Of course I do, my mind is just elsewhere.” Viola flicked her head away.

Constance knew she should utter her apology, but still, it did not come. Before she could rouse herself to do it, the carriage came to a stop, and she turned to look out of the window.

All guilt she felt flew from her body, as though it were a bird with great wings, flapping and gone in an instant, for standing on the doorstep of Somerset House was Mr. Bennett.

Constance was so excited to see him that she opened the door of the carriage herself and the footman arrived only just in time to offer her a hand to help her down. She was aware somewhere in the back

of her head that Viola and Judith were following, but she did not look back at them. Her eyes were fixed to Mr. Bennett at the top of the yellow-stone steps, standing by one of the pillars that bordered the door to Somerset House.

He turned, his sharp blue eyes finding her. The moment they did, she saw a smile light up his face, a smile almost as great as her own. He bounded down the steps toward her, coming so quickly that he practically took two steps at a time until he reached her side and offered a deep bow.

“It’s a wonder you did not fall, Mr. Bennett.” She giggled as she curtsied to him.

“If falling meant I would have been at your side sooner, I would have done it.” He smiled as he stood straight, lowering his voice so that only she could hear the words.

“Oh really?” She stood straight too. “But then I would have had to help you up off the floor.”

“I see no problem with that,” he offered again under his breath.

There was something unspoken in his eyes, a flirtation she had not heard from him before. It made the butterflies she was already feeling increase tenfold, and she was certain there was a blush on her cheeks as she imagined her hands on his arms, pulling him up off the floor.

“You look beautiful, Miss Constance,” he said more loudly as he offered her his arm.

“Thank you,” she murmured as she slid her arm through his. Her worries about Viola were long gone now. While she was beside Mr. Bennett, it seemed she was only able to think about him.

Viola

The sight of Mr. Bennett’s no doubt flirtatious comments to Constance made Viola feel nauseated. She pressed a hand to her stomach as she stepped out of the carriage, her ears perking up as she heard him tell Constance how beautiful she looked.

Of course, she is beautiful. She has always been beautiful; she is always the perfect picture.

Viola tried to stamp down on the monster of envy that was growing inside of her, but the task was a nearly impossible one. Looking between Mr. Bennett and Constance only reminded Viola how little people noticed her. She might as well be there as their chaperone instead of Judith.

Why did you have to have Mr. Bennett, Constance? You could have had any other man.

"Miss Viola?" A familiar voice disturbed her thoughts, and Viola turned to see the Marquess of Salisbury descending the steps toward her. When he reached her side, he offered a bow and she curtsied.

Viola had half wondered if he would truly come that day, after his confession that he had not actually offered the invitation to her for the promenade. As she stood straight from her curtsy, she looked between the Marquess and Mr. Bennett, thinking how similar to *The Taming of the Shrew* this moment was, with her being palmed off on

the gentleman that was closest.

As the Marquess stood straight, she lifted her eyes to his face and found him smiling at her. Briefly, all thoughts of Mr. Bennett and the *Taming of the Shrew* vanished. Instead, she was thinking much more of the depths of those dark eyes now staring at her. Looking at them a little more, she decided they were the color of coffee.

“May I have the honor of escorting you around Somerset House?” the Marquess asked and offered his arm.

Viola was tempted to step back, both alarmed by the admiration she was feeling for the Marquess’ dark features and her reluctance to accept. She wished more than anything that she was the one on Mr. Bennett’s arm, but it was not to be. She flicked her gaze to Constance, encouraging her with wide eyes to accept the Marquess’ offer.

“Thank you, that would be lovely,” Viola said politely, keeping her eyes downcast in the hope that the brim of her bonnet would keep the scar on her cheek covered. She slid her arm through the Marquess’, and he pulled her into his side before turning their path up

the steps.

The moment she felt his arm brush against her waist, her eyes looked up, startled by what had happened inside her. It was as though something had been lit at his touch. She compared it to striking the flint in a tinder box when lighting a candle. That spark, that shot of bright light . . . that was how it had felt inside of her.

She had never felt that way before, but it was powerful and all consuming, and she suddenly felt certain that she should not let go of his arm anytime soon.

Quietly, the Marquess escorted her into Somerset House. Behind them trailed Mr. Bennett and Constance, with Judith at the back. As they stepped through the entrance and the Marquess handed over their tickets, he turned Viola to the main exhibition room, and she lifted her head completely, in awe of the number of paintings that were scattered across the room.

“You look as though you have seen heaven itself, Miss Viola,” the Marquess said softly at her side.

“Oh no,” she said, more to herself than him. “Heaven would have more Constable paintings.”

The warm laugh that escaped the Marquess startled her enough to look back at him. Those coffee-colored eyes were gazing at her intently as he led her through the room.

“The more I talk to you, Miss Viola, the more you surprise me.” His voice had lowered, into something deeper.

“Is that a bad thing?” she asked innocently.

“On the contrary, it is quite a . . . captivating thing.” He offered her a smile. She felt the temptation to return it, allowing the corner of her mouth to tilt upward. “Well, if it is Constable you like, I hear they have *Landscape: Noon.”*

“They do?” Viola asked, hope filling her voice.

“This way.” The Marquess picked up their speed and led her into

an adjoining room. Viola looked over her shoulder briefly, seeking out Constance and Mr. Bennett. They followed, but at a much slower pace, with Judith at their side. “Here we are.”

The Marquess’ words pulled Viola’s attention again as they came to a stop. She turned her focus on the painting and this time her smile was instant, taking over her features completely.

“It is a beautiful painting.” She sighed, stepping nearer to it. She thought the Marquess would release her arm as she moved, but he held tightly and moved forward with her.

“I think it is one of those paintings where everyone sees something different.” The Marquess’ words urged her to look up at him.

“How do you mean?”

“Well, what do you see first, when you look at it? Which part of the story Constable tells captures you?” He gestured to the painting.

She looked back again, allowing her eyes to dance across the scene.

“The man on the back of the cart with his face turned towards us.” She smiled and pointed out the figure. “I can imagine he’s talking to the other man here.”

“What do you think they’re saying?” The Marquess tilted his head to the side as he spoke.

“Oh, I reckon he’s telling the other one off for having driven so poorly and dragging them all into the river.” At her wit, the Marquess laughed again.

She so rarely spoke her real thoughts or used such wit in front of strangers, but the Marquess no longer felt like a stranger to her. In fact, as he laughed, she felt entirely distracted. Her eyes no longer danced across the painting; they darted up and down the Marquess instead.

She was appraising his tall frame and broad shoulders, the small

sign of stubble on his square jaw, the darkness of his hair, and the tanned skin. He was an attractive man indeed. As fast as Viola thought it, she bit her lip.

How can I be attracted to the Marquess? My mind has been fixed on Mr. Bennett for so long. No, this is all in my imagination. Mr. Bennett is the man for me, not the Marquess.

"If it is an argument, it explains why he's gesturing so madly with his arms," the Marquess confirmed, his own gaze on the painting. "Constable has captured the beauty of the landscape though. Having seen it, I can concur he has portrayed the place perfectly."

"You have been there?" Her startled voice made him look back at her, smiling at her.

"I have," he confirmed with a nod. "It's a place called Flatford."

"Is there a place in this world you haven't been?" she asked, teasing him.

“Plenty of places,” he agreed with a nod. “But yes, there are many places I have seen. I get restless if I stay in one place too long. I always want to see the next thing, the next beautiful place.”

“Then why have you have come back to London?” Viola asked, intrigued to hear his answer. “I imagine your country seat has many more beauties than there are here.”

“It does,” he said with a smile. “It is on the outskirts of Salisbury. You remember when we spoke before of those white horses on hills in Wiltshire?”

“Yes,” she confirmed.

“Well, you can see one of them from my garden,” he explained.

“Really?” At this idea, Viola turned, excited. She felt her hold on his arm become a little tighter, but he did not seem to mind. In fact . . . his smile grew greater. “Every day you could go walking in such a beautiful place?”

“I could, but as I told you before, these beautiful places are not so much fun when you have no one to share them with,” he spoke quietly, lowering his voice.

“I look at the countryside to escape the business of London,” she confessed, surprised how easily the words rolled off her tongue. “I rather like the emptiness of the countryside.”

“Trust me, Miss Viola.” He shook his head softly. “It gets lonely after a while.” He seemed to be trying to say something else to her. Viola could recognize it in the way his gaze held hers, but what it was, she didn’t know.

“Shall we move on?” she asked, curious to see the other paintings.

“Miss Viola, wait,” he murmured, holding onto her arm. The strength there sent a shot of excitement through her, but she tried to clamp down on it as she looked around them. Mr. Bennett and Constance were on the far side of the room, with Judith close behind them.

“Yes?” She returned her eyes to the Marquess.

“I am going to take advantage of our chaperone being momentarily distracted by your sister.” He gestured with his head across the room.

“You are?” Viola was stunned.

He is here simply to aid his friend, is he not? Why would he say such a thing?

He lifted a hand to where her arm was around his and took her hand in his own. From where they stood at the side of the room with their backs to the other visitors, no one could see what they were doing. The touch of his hand sent a thrill through her.

“When I am traipsing through the countryside, seeing these beautiful places, I want a companion. Someone to talk to of all these beautiful things,” he spoke quickly, leaving her to frown for a moment in confusion. “To be frank, Miss Viola, I want to talk with someone

about the countryside and about art for hours on end with ease." He paused, apparently swallowing. "The way we do."

Oh my . . .

"My lord, I am afraid I must stop you there." Viola didn't know what was happening; all she knew was that she had to stop it.

She had told herself for so long that Mr. Bennett was the only gentleman for her. Having the Marquess say these things to her . . . it was wrong, wasn't it?"

"What is the matter?" he asked.

"I am flattered by your words, and I think you a very fine gentleman indeed, but before you say anymore, there is something you should know." Her eyes flicked across the room to where Mr. Bennett stood before returning to the Marquess' face. "I am in love with another man."

The moment the words left her lips, she felt a little numb. Was

that even true? Was she really *in love* with Mr. Bennett? She supposed she must be. It would explain her jealousy of Constance, wouldn't it?

The Marquess said nothing. His dark eyes just turned away from her toward the painting. There was a muscle in his jaw that twitched. He was clearly trying to keep up a façade, but there was another emotion there.

Is he . . . upset?

Viola regretted her words instantly. By the looks of things, the Marquess did genuinely care for her.

Then he deserves to know how I feel. That my heart belongs to another.

"If you would excuse me, Miss Viola, I need some air." He didn't even look at her as his arm slipped away from hers. The moment his arm left hers, she felt adrift. She wanted it back, as though it anchored her to the ground.

Instead, she had to watch him hurry out of the room with purpose, his back to her.

What is this feeling?

She turned back to the Constable painting, trying to lose herself in the scenery, yet all she could think about was the chasm that had just opened up in her abdomen.

She heard footsteps approach. She turned around, hoping it would be the Marquess returning to her, but it was not. To her amazement, it was the Marquess of Devonshire.

"Miss Viola," He bowed quickly to her, his manner showing that there was something urgent he wished to say.

"My lord." She curtsied, startled he had approached her when he so clearly favored Constance.

Like everyone else . . . apart from the Marquess of Salisbury, apparently.

“I know your secret.” The Marquess of Devonshire turned so that he was standing by her side, and together they faced the Constable painting.

“My secret?” Her heart leapt into her throat, terrified that such a stranger to her could know something unspoken within her.

“Maybe those around you are blind, Miss Viola, but I am not.” He looked at her, holding her gaze for a moment. “It seems you look longingly across the room at Mr. Bennett, the same way I look at your sister.”

Viola tried to move away. Hearing these words aloud was too much to bear, but before she could move, the Marquess had taken her arm and pulled her back.

“Listen awhile, Miss Viola. If we work together, perhaps there is a way for us to both get what we want.”

Chapter 14

Constance

"Viola, is all well?" Constance asked her sister for what felt like the fifteenth time that day.

"Yes, of course," Viola said through gritted teeth and turned away.

Constance frowned as she followed her sister and mother into the modiste's. It had been a week since their visit to Somerset House, and in that week, it had not escaped Constance's notice that Viola seemed rather different. It was as though she walked everywhere on eggshells, even meeker and milder than she had been before, barely speaking at all. Even when Constance had come to her side when she painted, attempting to talk with her, she barely entertained conversation.

Something was wrong, Constance was certain of it. Whatever it was, she would have to show Viola that she could trust her with this secret.

As they stepped into the modiste's, Jane was all a flutter. She

picked up the nearest material and held it instantly up to Constance's face.

"Oh, look at this one! It would be perfect for the ball!" Jane was pulling the fabric across Constance's shoulder, nearly knocking her off her feet in her animation.

Constance tried to push the material away as she looked across the shop at Viola, who had her eyes averted. The sense of guilt Constance had felt a few days before returned.

I have not been there for my sister recently as I should have been. I have been caught up in our mother's excitement. I should have been more sensitive towards Viola!

"Let's choose some fabric for Viola first, Mother." Constance pushed the material away instantly and crossed the room to her sister.

Jane appeared astonished by this move, but Constance didn't care. She had ignored Viola's feelings enough recently; she needed to take more care.

“Oh, I am so excited about this ball,” Jane said, just as the modiste stepped through from the back room.

“Ah, Mrs. Henderson,” the modiste said, a French accent lacing her voice as she moved across the room, turning her attention away. “What can I do for you today?”

“New dresses for all three of us, please,” Jane said with glee. “The Viscountess of Haywood is holding a ball next week, and I am determined everything must be right for it. What do you think of this pale pink for Constance?” She returned to the material she had already picked up and held it up in front of Constance again.

“Mother . . .” Constance could tell her warning tone did little good. She looked back, but Viola was slipping away across the shop, looking at the other dresses on show.

“Perfect,” the French modiste said kindly, “but perhaps we should start with you first, Mrs. Henderson?”

“Yes, I suppose you’re right.” Jane placed down the material and followed the modiste down to the fitting space behind curtains at the far side of the room.

Constance used the opportunity to corner her sister in the room. Clearly Viola was not going to divulge whatever was upsetting her easily. In order to reach such a point, Constance would have to build up her sister’s trust first.

She engaged Viola in conversation about art and painting, pleased to see that the topic brought a soft smile to her cheeks. Yet when Constance turned the conversation to their visit to Somerset House a few days before, that smile vanished.

“Did something happen at Somerset House?” Constance asked, following Viola as she slipped between the different materials.

“No,” Viola said quickly. So quickly that Constance was not convinced.

“Constance, it is your turn!” Jane’s voice called from across the

room. Constance froze, wincing at the sound of her mother's voice.

Once again, Jane was going against convention, insisting that Constance was fitted before Viola.

"Mother." Constance tried to keep her composure as she looked across the space at her mother who was peeking her head beyond the curtains. "It should be Viola's turn next." Viola was the eldest daughter, after all.

"Oh, it does not matter," Jane shrugged it off. "We know what material you want, after all. Come on," she beckoned her across the room.

Constance nodded, but she still pursued Viola across the room, linking arms with her and pulling her into the fitting area too.

"Our mother doesn't seem aware of propriety at all these days," she whispered, just for Viola to hear.

"That is hardly new, Constance," Viola said just as quietly.

“Stay with me, Viola,” Constance pleaded. “I would be grateful for your thoughts on the dress.” She held her sister’s gaze, trying to convey how much she valued her opinion. Viola smiled slightly and nodded in assent.

All that happened next was a blur of fabric and lace, with Constance being threaded in and out of new corsets and chemises and with the pale pink material wrapping around her body. Halfway through the fitting, Jane spied some acquaintances entering the shop and slipped off to speak with them, giving Constance a chance to talk to Viola alone while the modiste went to fetch some more pins.

“I thought Somerset House was very beautiful,” Constance began slowly, determined to open up this conversation again as she stared into the mirror. She figured a more indirect approach as to what was bothering Viola might work. To her surprise, Viola appeared behind her in the reflection, clearing her throat.

“The exhibition was not the only thing you seemed enraptured by,” Viola said softly. At these words, Constance couldn’t help

giggling, feeling her cheeks blush with the movement.

“Oh, Viola, I cannot help it.” She sighed happily, turning around to look directly at her sister. “Mr. Bennett is unlike any other man I have ever met.”

“Yes, I know,” Viola agreed. “You must be careful, Constance.”

“Careful? Whatever for?” Constance stepped back in surprise.

“His reputation.” Viola shrugged. “You know how poor it is.”

“Nonsense, there is nothing to be worried about. I am getting to know the real man, rather than what people say about him. There is a big difference between the two,” she declared confidently before turning back to look in the mirror. She fiddled with some of the pins the modiste had done, dissatisfied with the fit. “Mr. Bennett is the perfect gentleman, of that I can assure you.”

“Then he has changed his philandering ways?” Viola’s reflection appeared behind Constance in the mirror again.

“He said that was all in the past.” Constance kept her voice level, growing irked at Viola’s interference.

“And you believe him?”

“Yes, of course I do.” Constance flicked her head round again. The movement was so sharp that Viola stepped back in surprise. “Where has this come from?”

“Constance, you are my sister,” Viola said softly with a warm smile. “It is my responsibility to look out for you.” She looked around, as though wary of anyone nearby who could listen and lowered her voice. “I heard a rumor this week that he was seen visiting a disreputable club.”

“Well, I am ready to believe he visited a club. The disreputable part though, I highly doubt,” Constance said firmly, shaking her head. “Thank you for your concern, sister, but you really do not need to worry. Many men enjoy a visit to a gentlemen’s club, our father included. Mr. Bennett is no different. Oh, Viola.” Constance laughed.

“I think you are just being a little paranoid. In fact, I think I will tell you a secret to put you at ease . . .”

“Do tell,” Viola encouraged with a smile. Constance reached for her hand, looping their fingers together.

“But you mustn’t tell anyone?” Constance pleaded.

“You are the only one I tell secrets to, so you are quite safe,” Viola assured.

“Well, here it is . . .” Constance couldn’t keep the smile off her face. “I think I am falling in love with Mr. Bennett.”

Viola

Viola felt as if she had turned into a statue. For a moment, she said nothing; she just watched as Constance giggled and turned away from her, staring into the mirror once more.

“Do you think he’ll like the dress?” she asked Viola as she fiddled with the material.

“I am sure he will.” Viola tried to smile, struggling with the action.

She is in love with him too. How did this happen?

Ever since Somerset House, Viola had struggled to sleep; the two strange encounters she’d had that day haunted her. The first was the Marquess of Salisbury’s face when she had told him she loved another. The second was what the Marquess of Devonshire’s had said.

Even now, after days of thinking about it, she could barely make sense of his words. Yes, there was some reasoning and some logic to it, but there was much that seemed wrong as well . . . he wanted them to work together, in order to get what they both wanted. Part of her was excited by the idea that perhaps Mr. Bennett would turn around and finally notice her, yet it all seemed so strange.

She had pretty much decided on ignoring the Marquess’ plan, but it lingered, constantly, and the more Jane had favored Constance over the last few days, the better his plan seemed to Viola.

She would have to put distance between Constance and Mr. Bennett, but with the news that her sister was falling in love with the gentleman, that task just became a whole lot more difficult.

"From what I hear, ma'am," the French modiste said after she returned with fresh pins in her hand, "we may be back here soon with me fitting you for a wedding dress." She laughed as she started pinning some more of Constance's material.

Constance giggled too, clearly utterly delighted.

"Oh! That is jumping too far ahead, I am sure." Constance was smiling nevertheless and twisting round as she looked in the mirror.

Viola turned away entirely, unable to look her sister's way anymore. Her mind was full of images, pictures of Mr. Bennett marrying Constance. What an agony that would be for Viola to suffer! She saw Constance on Mr. Bennett's arm by the altar. She saw their mother's joy and barely contained glee, and the pride in her father's face as well, while she was pushed to the far end of the pew, standing

alone, watching her beautiful sister marry the man Viola had latched her hope on.

She imagined the ceremony coming to an end and Mr. Bennett reaching down to kiss Constance. The sight of it was too much. She could practically hear the way Jane would be cheering and clapping her hands together.

“Well, who knows yet who the husband will be?” She turned back and addressed her comments to the modiste rather than to Constance.

“Oh, yes,” the modiste continued, “I have heard, Miss Constance, that you have more than one admirer. The Marquess of Devonshire as well as Mr. Bennett, if the scandal papers are to be believed.”

“Well, I would never marry *him*.” Constance shook her head and looked at Viola. “Am I right, Viola? What an odious man he is!”

“Constance.” Viola laughed at her sister. “You must realize that many a lady in London would die to be in your position at this

moment. The Marquess of Devonshire is to someday be a duke!"

"What do I care for his title?" Constance brushed it off.

"Oh, listen to yourself." Viola decided that the soft-natured approach was better than constantly undermining Mr. Bennett in front of Constance. She stepped forward and took Constance's hand in her own, urging her to look back at her. "You have been named *the Sapphire of the Season*."

"I saw that!" the modiste said with glee. "It's all over the scandal papers, ma'am."

"Oh dear, how embarrassing." Constance covered her face for a moment.

"It means, to be frank, you have the pick of the crop." Viola was relieved to see her words made Constance laugh.

"You talk as though I am at a farmers' market rather than deciding on a husband." Constance shook her head as she tried to

calm her giggles.

“Perhaps there is a comparison to be made,” Viola said with wit. “We pick food at the market because of what is most prized and liked, is there a difference in picking a man?”

“I hope so.” Constance was now wiping tears from her eyes in her effort to stop laughing.

“In all seriousness for a minute.” Viola squeezed her sister’s hand as the modiste dropped to the floor to pin the train of the dress. “You cannot have missed the way the Marquess of Devonshire stares at you.”

“I haven’t,” Constance assured. “It feels as though I am being stalked from the shadows. Like I am some prey rather than a woman.”

“Listen to me, Constance.” She stepped toward her sister, pleased when Constance lifted her head and held her gaze, listening openly. “You are the greatest sister any woman could ever ask for. I truly believe you deserve the best man and position that is out there for

you.”

“Oh, Viola.” Constance lifted her other hand to clasp Viola’s in her two palms.

“For my sake, so I know I have done everything I can to look out for you, keep your options open,” Viola pleaded. “I want the best for you.”

“You are so kind.” Constance opened her arms and pulled Viola into a warm embrace.

Viola knew that her words were honest. With all of her being, she did want the best for Constance and for her to be happy.

The Marquess of Devonshire could be the best thing for her. He believes so, as he said the other day. This is right, isn’t it?

Yet as Constance released her from the embrace, Viola was not sure what to feel anymore.

Chapter 15

Viola

Viola was lost in her painting. Her paintbrush followed her memory, tracing the day when she had run up the hill in Wiltshire. She had been desperate to be away from her family and enjoy a moment of freedom at the top of the slope. Her paintbrush quickly created the hills and the valleys, with the clops of mud and the blades of grass dappling the ground, with the occasional ladybug and butterfly dancing in the air.

In her mind's eye, she was back on that hill in Wiltshire, as if she could reach out and touch those butterflies, walk across the white chalk horse, and feel the crunch beneath her shoes as her dress rippled in the wind.

She opened her eyes, seeing the picture she was creating bit by bit with satisfaction.

The painting before her encapsulated the feeling perfectly. It was from the perspective of someone standing far behind her, staring down at her on the white horse, and the view beyond that ended in

rolling hills and billowing fluffy white clouds scattered across the blue sky. It was a good painting; one she was reasonably happy with. Yet, something was missing. The more she gazed at it, the more certain this feeling became. As though there was an emptiness that resided within the painting.

She stared at it for a long time until an idea occurred to her. She tried not to think too much of what she was doing as she picked up a clean paintbrush and dipped it into some freshly mixed brown paint. She lifted the brush to the painting and began to create a figure beside her.

The movements were quick, with short, dashed lines and fast flicks. Emerging with concentration and inspiration, the figure began to appear until she was no longer alone on the white chalk horse etched into the earth. When nearly complete, she sat back, staring at the addition.

Like her, he had his back to the viewer. Together, they were standing side by side looking down at the chalk horse. The figure was tall, broad shouldered, with tanned skin and brown hair. His hand was

down by his side, his fingers within touching distance of her own, though he did not touch her. There was a slip of air between them.

When she realized who she had painted beside her own figure, she dropped the paintbrush.

“Viola, do be careful! You will get paint on the floor,” Jane’s voice warned from across the room.

“Sorry, Mother.” Viola picked it up quickly and mopped up a few drops of the brown paint from the floorboards.

“So, Constance.” Jane turned her attention back to Constance who was sorting through sheet music, choosing a piece to play on the pianoforte. “When should we expect another visit from Mr. Bennett?”

“Mother,” Constance held a warning tone. “You know I cannot possibly know that.” Yet she smiled as she said it.

Viola was looking between the painting and Constance, in an utter state of confusion.

Why did I paint the Marquess beside me?

She tried to turn her focus to Constance and the discussion of Mr. Bennett instead, but it was a difficult one. It had been three days since their visit to the modiste and Viola's warning to Constance of keeping her options open, but it seemed to have done little use. Constance's and Mr. Bennett's romance seemed to be blooming every day with Jane now having picked up the mantle so firmly that she mentioned Mr. Bennett to Constance at every opportunity.

"Perhaps he will come today?" Jane said as she plucked out a piece of music for Constance to play.

In a way, Viola hoped Mr. Bennett would not choose that morning, as the Marquess of Devonshire was planning a visit. He had suggested this plan to Viola upon the visit to Somerset House, that perhaps if he pretended to be interested in Viola, they could stir jealousy within Constance. Therefore, it would be best if Constance remained without a visitor that day. She needed to stay in the room, undistracted, ready to see the Marquess paying all his attention to the

other sister.

Would it work?

Viola was not convinced, but it was possible. She bit her lip as she looked down at the painting, wondering again why she had agreed to the Marquess' plan. Thinking back, she couldn't even quite remember what he had said that had persuaded her this was the right thing to do. However, he had somehow steered her down this path.

"Oh, I hear a carriage!" Jane suddenly dropped the music and turned to the window, but their position in the house made it impossible to see the road. "Perhaps it is Mr. Bennett now."

"Do calm yourself, Mother," Constance pleaded with a giggle. "You will frighten him away."

"Nonsense, how could he be frightened when he's got you to look at, my dear," Jane said sweetly, turning back to Constance and tucking a lock of hair behind her ear.

Viola bit her lip to hold in a groan. As she watched her mother and sister together, Jane turned to look at her.

"Now, are we all set for a visitor? Viola, perhaps you should put your paints down for a little while." Jane crossed the room and reached her side. Viola followed the instructions and began to pack her supplies away. Then a touch startled her. She looked up to see Jane standing beside her, fiddling with Viola's hair. Jane pulled the curls forward from behind her ear and trailed them across Viola's cheek, in front of the scar.

Jane offered her a smile before walking away across the room, returning to Constance's side.

The action brought Viola to the brink of tears. She looked down at the paints she was packing away, trying to hold her tears at bay.

Does she have to always do that? I know I'm an aberration without her reminders.

"Quick, Constance, play the pianoforte. We want Mr. Bennett to

hear your beautiful playing." Jane flapped her arms at her, urging her to her seat.

"Mother, we do not know if it is Mr. Bennett," Constance complained, but sat at the piano anyway and put her fingers to the keys.

"Well, who else would it be?" Jane laughed before taking her seat nearby. Viola had to hold in a smirk when she saw Jane pick up some crochet and a needle from a box, feigning interest in her activity as there was a knock at the door. "Enter?"

The butler pushed the door open, poking his head through the gap.

"Mrs. Henderson, there is a caller for Miss Viola." The butler's words were met with surprise.

Jane pricked her finger on the needle and Constance broke off playing instantly, both of them flicking their heads toward the door.

Viola frowned, thinking it was a little early for the Marquess' planned arrival.

"Well, show him in." Jane waved at the butler, trying to hide her pricked finger behind her back as she stood to her feet.

The door opened wider and in stepped the Marquess of Salisbury.

Viola was so stunned that she stumbled to her feet, nearly knocking over the easel beside her. The Marquess' dark coffee-colored eyes found her across the room. In his arms was a bunch of wildflowers. In that grasp, Viola could see honeysuckle, dog rose, and buttercups.

"Mrs. Henderson." He bowed deeply to her mother first, though his eyes didn't leave Viola for long.

"My lord, it's a pleasure to see you again." Jane looked confused. "You have come to see Viola?"

"I have," he assured. "Please, do not let me disturb you and Miss

Constance from your activities." He gestured to the piano and the crochet before crossing the room toward Viola.

She felt her insides writhe, the sensation both thrilling and nerve-racking. She didn't know whether to be happy to see him or disappointed.

"Miss Viola." He bowed to her as she curtsied. "These are for you."

"Th-thank you," she stuttered in surprise as she took the flowers from him and inhaled the sweet honeysuckles scent. "They're very beautiful. I love wildflowers."

"I had a feeling you would prefer them to hothouse roses or something else of the kind," he said with honesty.

"You were right." She looked at him in surprise, amazed he had read her so well.

She wanted to ask him why he was there. After her rejection the

other day, what had possessed him to return to her side? But she couldn't bring herself to say the words, fearful saying something of the kind would make him go away again.

She was relieved when Constance went back to her piano and Jane concentrated on her crochet, giving them a moment of privacy.

"You are painting," he said, gesturing to the easel.

Viola blushed instantly, realizing what she had just painted.

"Oh, it is merely a preparatory painting," she said quickly, holding tightly to the flowers, hoping she could hide it from him.

"May I see?" he asked, already walking around the easel.

"I'm not sure that is a . . ." But she faltered as he moved to stand next to her, locking eyes on the painting.

She hung her head instantly, feeling the curls of her hair masking the scar completely as she grimaced. For a minute, there was silence

between them. No words passed, and she was very aware of the honeysuckle in her fingers and the way he breathed beside her.

"Well, you have talent," he murmured softly.

"I do?" She looked up, too pleased by the words to keep staring down.

"I have never seen a painting style quite like yours. It is . . ." As he paused, debating the right word, she watched his face, admiring the curve of his lips and the way he scratched his jaw in thought. "Dream-like. Almost wistful."

"I guess it is because I see all those places in my dreams these days," she explained as she turned to one of the clean glasses of water that she would have used to wash her paintbrushes. She placed the wildflowers in the glass on the table next to her.

"And tell me . . . who is this figure?" he asked, his voice lilting with a knowing smile.

She looked back at him, unable to keep from smiling herself. As their gazes connected, he raised his eyebrows, clearly knowing her answer.

“There is something familiar in him,” he said, urging her on.

“Oh really?” she teased.

“Yes, I think I’ve seen the hair and the figure before. I’m sure I see him every day in a place called a mirror,” he said with a chuckle.

Viola covered her face as she laughed nervously too.

“You did not need to point it out,” she said, muttering under her breath, but still, he chuckled.

“Why on earth not? This gives me greater happiness than I have felt in days!” He gestured to the painting, making her look out from the cover of her hand.

“It does?”

“Yes, it does.” He smiled.

Viola tried to ignore the way butterflies hovered in her stomach.

The Marquess is not the man for me. Mr. Bennett is. Remember that!

She needed to change the subject, to stop this easy conversation between them before she gave him the wrong idea.

“Forgive me, my lord,” she said hesitantly, “but I am surprised to see you here.”

“So I can see.” He pointed to her face with a smirk before he pulled out a chair and sat down. She took her place beside him on her painting stool. “I owe you an apology, and I needed to tell you something.”

“An apology? Whatever for?” she asked, feeling herself involuntarily reaching out to the flowers he had brought for her. She picked out one of the stems of honeysuckle and brought it up to her

nose, inhaling the soft scent.

“For leaving the way I did last week at Somerset House,” he said quietly.

“You do not need to apologize for that.” She shook her head, keeping her focus on the flower.

“No, I do,” he assured. “To say you stunned me by what you had to say is an understatement. I think gutted is more applicable.”

“Gutted?” she repeated in amazement, looking up to him.

“Yes,” he assured. “And that is why I have come to see you today.”

“I do not understand.” She frowned, shaking her head slightly as she fiddled with the flower.

“You told me that you are in love with another,” he whispered. “Yet I am not to be dissuaded.”

“You seem awfully confident for a man told that his interest was pining after another,” she said equally quietly, tilting her head in surprise.

“Not confident.” He shook his head. “Optimistic. There’s something here, Miss Viola.” His voice was so quiet now that it was barely audible, and Viola had to lean toward him to hear him clearly. “Maybe it will just take a little time to help you to see it too.”

Viola didn’t know whether to smile or to tell him he was being foolish.

“This,” he said and pointed to the painting where she had painted him beside her looking at the white horse, “tells me I am not hoping in vain.”

I would not be sure about that.

Her fingers tightened around the honeysuckle, and she was more confused than she had been in days.

Before she could think of a reply, there was the sound of heavy sneezing in the room. She looked beyond the painting to see Constance break off from her playing in a sneezing fit.

“Oh, Constance!” Jane cried in panic. “Is it your hay fever?”

Constance couldn’t even reply as she was clearly holding onto the bridge of her nose, trying to stop her sneezes.

“Ah,” the Marquess said in Viola’s ear, “it seems my flowers have caused some trouble.”

“It’s only wildflowers,” Viola explained. “She has no trouble with flowers from hothouses.”

“I should have brought something else then—”

“No,” Viola assured him, lifting the honeysuckle to her nose again. “I prefer wildflowers, just as you guessed.”

This time when he smiled at her, she returned the smile.

Then Constance's sneezing grew worse, dragging her gaze away. Constance stood up as Jane offered her a handkerchief.

"Excuse me," Constance said quickly in their direction before dashing out of the room so fast that Jane was left behind with a startled expression.

Wait . . . she cannot leave the room!

Viola realized the true consequence of this moment. With Constance out of the room and the Marquess of Devonshire about to arrive any moment, Constance would not see him paying his attention to Viola. Their plan to stir Constance's jealousies would be futile! All for nothing!

Viola felt some anger turn on the Marquess of Salisbury as she returned the honeysuckle to the bunch.

A riveting gentleman you may be, my lord, but you have just spoiled

my plans entirely.

She only wished she had the confidence to tell him as much, but his focus was still on the painting and he was smiling as his dark eyes traced his figure standing beside hers.

“Why do you paint yourself looking away?” he asked, gesturing to the painting.

“I always do.” She shrugged.

“But why?” he asked again, turning his dark eyes back to stare at her.

“Do you need ask?” She pulled at her hair, ensuring it was still covering her scar. His face altered instantly, changing to one of sorrow.

“I don’t understand,” he said quietly. His hand moved, and she wondered if he was going to reach out to her hair, brush it away again, but he kept his hand down, his eyes flicking to Jane in the

room before returning to her.

“Look at the painting,” she said with animation. “It is a beautiful place, a beautiful setting! I like to paint beautiful things, my lord. That is why I never show my face.”

“That is madness,” he said, shaking his head.

“Why?” She frowned.

“Because when I look at you, I see someone exceptionally beautiful.”

Chapter 16

Constance

Constance was seeing to her reflection in the mirror in the entrance hall, dabbing her running eyes with the handkerchief. Now she was out of the room, her hay fever seemed to be under control and her flushed complexion was slowly returning back to normal.

She turned away from the mirror, preparing to head back down the corridor to the drawing room when there was a knock at the front door. She waited, curious and hopeful that Mr. Bennett had come to call as the butler went to answer it. Yet as the door was opened, Constance felt her heart sink.

On the other side was not the handsome face of Mr. Bennett, but the turned-up nose of the Marquess of Devonshire.

What is he doing here?

In his hand was a bunch of white lilies. She winced at the sight of them, for only someone so absorbed in their own business would fail to know that lilies were a funereal flower, and not traditionally

given to a young lady as a token of affection.

She turned, ready to hurry away before he saw her, but it was too late.

“Ah, Miss Constance.” His words brought her to a stop. She turned back to see him stepping forward with the butler in tow, preparing to announce him in the drawing room. “How are you today?” he asked as he bowed.

“I am well, thank you.” She locked her hands behind her back after she curtsied, reluctant to take the lilies from his hands. “Apologies, my lord, but I am already expecting a guest this morning. I fear you have come at a bad time.” The lie came swiftly from her, so eager she was to ensure that he turn around and leave the house again, but he merely shook his head in response with the smallest of smiles.

“Then it is perhaps fortunate I have come to see your sister. If you would.” He addressed the latter part to the butler who nodded and led him down the corridor.

Constance was baffled, so much so that she was certain her jaw hit the floor in shock.

The Marquess of Devonshire is visiting Viola? Yet he has been staring at me for weeks now!

Something did not make sense . . . something had to be amiss.

She scampered after them toward the drawing room, but she had to jump back as the Marquess of Salisbury stepped out of the room.

“Devonshire.” He smiled good-naturedly and bowed when he saw the other Marquess.

“Salisbury.” The Marquess of Devonshire bowed, but not as deeply. Constance wrinkled her nose at the sight. Here were two sons of two dukes, face to face. Both marquesses and both set to be dukes someday themselves. Even when faced with someone who was in equal standing to him, the Marquess of Devonshire clearly couldn’t condone giving due respect.

What a conceited man you are!

“I trust you have recovered from your hay fever, Miss Constance?” the Marquess of Salisbury addressed her.

“Yes, thank you.” She nodded with a smile.

“Good, I believe your mother is removing my gift from the room now for your comfort,” he assured.

“Are you leaving so soon?” Constance asked, trying to hide the panic in her voice. She wished the Marquess of Salisbury would stay, and occupy Viola’s time a little longer, so that she would not be forced into the Marquess of Devonshire’s company.

“I must go, but I wish you a good day.” He bowed to her as she offered a curtsy and hurried off down the corridor, sharing one glare with the Marquess of Devonshire before he disappeared.

Well, this place is certainly busy this morning.

Constance followed the butler and the Marquess of Devonshire into the room.

“Another visitor for Miss Viola, ma’am,” the butler addressed Jane.

“Really?” Jane asked in surprise. Constance quickly moved to her side and elbowed her as surreptitiously as she could. “What was that for?” Jane whispered to Constance as the two of them watched the Marquess of Devonshire cross the room toward Viola.

“You know very well what, Mother.” Constance’s voice was a firm whisper. She was tired of having to tiptoe around Jane and not point out matter-of-factly just how callous and ignorant she could sometimes be of Viola’s feelings.

“No, I do not. Pray, Constance, tell.” Jane was pushing the matter now, making Constance more and more uncomfortable.

“You should not sound so surprised that Viola has a gentleman

caller," Constance continued to whisper, thankful they were far out of earshot of the Marquess and Viola.

"Well, there are two of them today. Is that not surprising?" Jane asked, apparently innocently. Constance could only offer another dark glare at her mother.

You really are hopeless, Mother!

Constance turned her attention back to Viola and the Marquess, feeling her suspicions grow worse with each passing second. Viola looked surprisingly pleased in the Marquess' company, laughing at whatever jests he was telling her as he sat by her side. Still, the man sat there proudly with his chin tucked high.

The image looked wrong to Constance . . . she almost felt sick. For one thing, this sudden change in affections from one sister to the other was so stark that it was odd, but the two were also an extremely ill fit. Where Viola was gentle and nervous, with hidden wit and intelligence, the Marquess had none of these qualities. He was loud, outspoken, and vain, and from what Constance had viewed, he did not

have the cleverness to match or even appreciate Viola's wit.

This cannot be a match that is allowed to happen.

As Constance's gaze flicked between the apparently contented faces of the Marquess and Viola, that conviction grew stronger. She was certain this foul gentleman could not make Viola happy in the long run.

"Lilies, now that is better," Jane whispered to Constance and urged her to sit at her side as they watched the Marquess present Viola with the flowers.

"Mother, lilies are funeral flowers. They're hardly roses." Constance pouted at the idea, watching as Viola took the bouquet. She looked happy, but as she dipped her nose into the blooms, Constance was watching her sister closely enough to see there was a falter in that smile. "Viola preferred the wildflowers."

"Oh, I do not." Jane shook her head with vehemence. "Wildflowers, they could have bugs and insects crawling in them. All

brought into my house!”

“That is to be expected with flowers.” Constance had to stop herself from rolling her eyes.

“They made you sneeze too,” Jane pointed out, gesturing to her.

“What does that matter?” Constance asked, baffled. “Viola preferred them, Mother. I know she did.”

“She looks happy to me.” Jane shrugged, picking up her crochet again.

Constance did not like it at all. The Marquess of Salisbury seemed a much finer match for Viola. In fact, she had only heard wonderful things spoken of the Marquess of Salisbury from Thomas.

The man loved to travel, and he had a passion for art. He was neither loud spoken, nor foolish. He was trustworthy, honest, and kind, with a good sense of humor too. On paper, he sounded the perfect match for Viola if he could get past the whispers about her and

her scar.

Clearly, the scar had not bothered him so far.

So why is Viola not interested in the Marquess of Salisbury?

That, she decided, is *a question for another day. What's important now is putting a stop to whatever is happening between the Marquess of Devonshire and Viola*. Before Constance could even invent a reason for why she would cross the room to interrupt the conversation, there was another rap at the door.

"Good Lord." Jane dropped her crochet to her lap. "It is like Piccadilly Circus in here this morning! Enter?"

The door opened and the butler peeked his head through.

"Mr. Bennett to see Miss Constance, ma'am." At his words, Constance jumped to her feet, her thoughts now utterly consumed by the caller.

Jane jumped up too, having stabbed herself in the hand a second time with her needle.

“Ah, Mr. Bennett, a pleasure to see you again.” Jane stepped forward and curtsied, her voice practically gushing.

“Thank you, and you, Mrs. Henderson,” he replied politely, offering a bow before he turned his head to Constance. The moment their eyes connected, it was electric, as though something shot through her just from the strength of his stare. “I cannot stay long, Miss Constance. I have just come to offer an invitation.”

He moved toward her, lifting his hand. For a moment, she thought he was going to take her hand, but with her mother beside her, he did not.

“An invitation?” she repeated, intrigued.

“Yes, to a picnic,” he said with a smile. “I would like to introduce you to my parents. My mother has arranged for a rather lavish picnic to be set up in our country seat, and you are invited to come and get

to know them."

"Mr. Bennett." She clasped her hands together, realizing what a step forward this was. This showed it was beyond just an interest in one another; they were now into the grounds of official courtship. "I would be honored. Delighted even."

"That is wonderful." He smiled, so greatly that the gesture crinkled his blue eyes. "I cannot stay any longer. I wish I could, but unfortunately, there is a business matter I need to attend to, but I shall see you in two days?"

"In two days." She curtsied to him as he bowed again.

"I wish you all a good day." He hurried back out, letting the door close softly behind him.

The moment he disappeared, Constance would have jumped up and down on the spot if it weren't for the Marquess of Devonshire's presence in the room.

Jane was not so full of restraint though. She stepped forward, giggling like a much younger woman and pushing Constance's auburn curls away from her eyes.

"You are to meet his parents, Constance! What a step this is!" Jane was still laughing.

"Now, Mother, do not jump ahead with your ideas—"

"No jumping ahead? Mr. Bennett is a future baron. Oh, I have heard their country estate is a fine one indeed! I can't wait to hear all about it from you," Jane was still prattling on.

"Mother." Constance was desperate to calm her, wishing she could have a moment in peace to think about the excitement Mr. Bennett had just caused within her.

"A picnic, too! Apparently, they have the finest strawberries on the Gerresborough estate. Surely, you will be so fortunate as to try some during your picnic." Jane would not be stopped; she was evidently in her element.

Constance took a moment to look across the room, where she found the Marquess of Devonshire and Viola both staring her way. She flinched at the sight, for neither one of them was smiling any more. The best word she could use to describe their looks was glower, and an unrelenting one at that.

Before Constance could even begin to understand what their stares were for, the Marquess was on his feet.

“I must take my leave too,” he said to Viola. “Good day to you, Miss Viola.” He bowed then turned his attention to Jane and Constance. “And to you, Mrs. Henderson, Miss Constance.”

Constance did not miss the way he drawled out her name, nor the devilish grin he offered her way as he departed. She watched him go with a frown, knowing beyond a doubt that something was amiss.

“Oh, I must tell your father of all these comings and goings.” Jane was flapping wildly as she hurried to the door. “The way we are going today, a prince will be walking through the door next!”

Constance waited until the door closed before she crossed the room, her eyes fixed on Viola.

“Viola, dear.” She hurried to her side, her voice full of worry. “We need a little heart-to-heart.”

“Yes, of course.” Viola turned her attention completely to Constance as she took the seat that had just been vacated by the Marquess.

“Please listen to me, Viola. There is something not right about the Marquess of Devonshire.” Constance thought her words would be welcome, but the moment she uttered them, Viola’s brow furrowed.

“Whatever do you mean?” she asked.

“There are better suitors out there for you, much better than him,” Constance pleaded.

“You speak as though I have many suitors to choose from.” Viola

pointed at the scar on her cheek.

“Well, you have the Marquess of Salisbury. He is a fine man. Please, turn your attentions there. Do not welcome the pursuit of the Marquess of Devonshire.” Constance leaned forward, reaching out for Viola’s hand, but Viola took it away, far out of reach.

“I do not believe this.” Viola was shaking her head. “I do not believe you would say such things. What if I think the Marquess of Devonshire is quite charming?”

“Charming!?” Constance scoffed. “Every other man I have ever met has more charm.”

“Even if he is not the perfect gentleman, what of it?” Viola reared back. “What if he is interested in courting me? Why should I not welcome it? It would secure my position as a duchess.”

“That makes no sense,” Constance complained, reaching out with both hands to Viola now. “The Marquess of Salisbury is a future duke too.”

“We are not talking about the Marquess of Salisbury.” Viola shook her head. “We are talking about the Marquess of Devonshire.”

“I just fear that the Marquess of Devonshire is not a man to be trusted,” Constance pleaded, but Viola was already on her feet, walking across the room.

“No, I do not think that’s what it is.” Viola hesitated with her hand on the door handle. “Do you know what I think, Constance? I think you don’t like the fact that after always having the attention of every gentleman that walks past us, one of them has now turned his attention to me.”

“It is not that!” Constance jumped to her feet, but Viola was out the door and gone. The sound of the door closing was so loud that Constance reared back and threw a hand to her face.

It took her a moment to calm down and consider Viola’s words.

It is not that . . . is it?

No, she was certain. The Marquess of Devonshire could not be trusted. It would be best if both of them stayed as far away from him as possible.

Chapter 17

Thomas

"Well, you must be thinking of something more pleasing than our investments, Mr. Bennett, because I've never known a business matter to put a smile like that on your face before." The Earl of Coleshire laughed, pulling Thomas from his thoughts.

"Apologies." He held up his hands in innocence and leaned forward over the desk where they had been looking at the accounts of their joint investment. "My mind seems to keep slipping away these days."

"I remember that kind of smile from my youth." The Earl rearranged the papers on his desk. Of a similar age to his father, the Earl had been in business with the Baron for many years, and Thomas was now beginning to take over his responsibilities. "A young woman must be the cause of it."

"What makes you say that?" Thomas couldn't stop his smile though, as he looked up at the Earl.

“Because you also look like your father. He wore that very smile,” he explained, gesturing at Thomas’ face, “every day of his life since he met your mother. So, come on, what is the young lady’s name?”

“Don’t we have business to attend to?” Thomas asked, gesturing down to the papers.

“It’s mostly done.” The Earl shrugged as he tidied away the legers. “So, what’s her name?”

“Miss Constance Henderson.” Thomas sighed; even saying her name made his spirits soar.

“Ah, beautiful young lady. Met her at the last assembly,” the Earl confirmed with a nod. “She is the one with the older sister who has the . . .” He gestured to his face.

“Yes,” Thomas agreed, though it made him a little uncomfortable. He had as good as said the same thing to Antony, merely referring to Viola’s scar and not her person, but hearing

somebody else do the same thing, he realized how rude it could sound. He tried not to think too much about it.

Instead, his mind wandered back to Constance again and the sight of her face earlier that day when he had called upon her. The way her hazel eyes had stared back at him made it clear she was quickly on the way to the same infatuation he felt.

Then, his mind slipped to the stares he had received from Viola and the Marquess of Devonshire when he had taken his leave. That unsettled him. The Marquess' glare did not surprise him, for they never saw eye to eye on any matter and a few days before he had seemed interested in Constance.

Viola's stare, though, was more unsettling. Thomas could only guess that Viola was intending on being a duchess, entertaining visits from the Marquess of Devonshire. She probably expected no less of Constance.

Oh, to be a lowly baron.

Thomas knew it was hardly lowly, but clearly it was not good enough.

“What’s got you upset now?” the Earl asked as he stood to his feet.

“Can you always read my emotions so easily?” Thomas stood too, laughing as the Earl gestured to his face.

“You wear your heart on your sleeve, Thomas. You always have done, ever since you were born. Even as a toddler it was easy to read your thoughts on your face.” The Earl filed away their ledgers. “Come on, I’ll walk you out. On the way you can tell me what’s troubling you.”

“It’s just a fear, I guess.” Thomas accepted his father’s friend’s comfort as he steered the two of them out of the study and back down the corridor. “Let’s just say I am not the only gentleman interested in Miss Constance’s hand.”

“Ah, and who is the competition?” the Earl asked.

“A future duke, I think.” Thomas screwed up his face in confusion. He had thought the Marquess of Devonshire wanted Constance, but then why was he visiting Miss Viola?

“And you are worried you cannot compete with that title?” The Earl was still smiling as they stepped out the front door.

“Does my misery amuse you?” Thomas taunted as he watched the Earl smile.

“A little. Forgive me, Thomas, I am getting old. It’s fun to remind myself of the heartaches of youth.” The Earl escorted him all the way down to the carriage. “But with age comes wisdom too, and if you’ll let me, there is a word of advice I can give you.”

“Please do, I’d be grateful for it.” Thomas nodded as he reached the carriage.

“Parents care for titles,” the Earl said, folding his arms. “They care for positions and estates, protecting their children, but where

young ladies are concerned, their hearts matter more than titles."

Thomas smiled, knowing how similar it was to the words Antony had shared with him the week before.

"Don't ladies follow the wishes of their parents?" Thomas asked as the footman opened the door for him.

"Sometimes." The Earl tilted his head to the side. "In my experience, women like to argue with their parents over the matter. And they usually win. Your job is to persuade the young lady that you're the one to fight for."

"Thanks, my friend," Thomas said, extending his hand. The Earl took it and shook eagerly.

"Knowing you, Thomas, you shouldn't have to worry. I've never known a woman yet not fall for your charms." The Earl laughed and urged him into the carriage.

Thomas smiled at the Earl's words and climbed inside, but he

was left unsettled at the same time. He did not doubt Constance's affection; it was whether she would defy her sister's expectations if he were to ask Constance to marry him.

"Careful, Antony!" Thomas called loudly as he backed away across the sports room.

"You've grown slow this last year." Antony pointed at him with the fencing sword, momentarily lifting up his meshed mask to look at Thomas.

Thomas did the same thing, feeling the sweat trickle down his forehead from the exercise.

"When did you get so undefeatable?" Thomas asked, leaning forward and trying to catch his breath. When Antony had suggested they practiced a round of fencing, Thomas had been eager for the exercise. Now, he was starting to regret it.

"Traveling the world, you meet many different fencing partners, and you learn a few tricks." Antony didn't even appear to be breaking

a sweat as he pointed at him with the rapier. “Besides, I’ve always beaten you. I can’t remember a time you won.”

“In my head, I always win.” Thomas laughed as he stood straight again.

“Of course you do.” Antony laughed too. “Come on, one more round.” Antony pulled down his mask and Thomas did so reluctantly.

This time when Antony launched forward, Thomas barely had a chance to get away.

With three strikes on the rapier, Thomas found the sword knocked completely from his hand. He heard the metal slide across the floor as Antony pointed the tip of his rapier at Thomas’ chest.

“I win again.” Antony laughed and lowered the sword.

“Good Lord, Antony.” Thomas stepped away and lifted his mask off again. “Remind me to never bet against you in anything. You seem to win every game we ever play! Cards, fencing . . . you’ve got to let

me win something at some point."

"Ah, do not concern yourself." Antony took off his mask and lifted the discarded sword from the floor before walking across the room to place them in the racks. "I may win at games, but I do not win at what truly matters to me."

These words were so strange that Thomas flicked his head toward his friend.

"Antony, what is wrong?" he asked, but Antony just shook his head.

"Nothing. How about a drink? It looks like you need it after that." Antony walked past him and clapped him on the shoulder. "You're sweating so much you'll fill up a port glass."

"Thanks. I thought I was fit, though I'm changing my opinion on that now," Thomas said as he walked out of the room, following Antony after placing the mask in the racks.

As they reached the parlor, Thomas flopped down into the chair, catching his breath as he looked around the room. Antony had decorated this room much the same as the others, draped in fine paintings with great plants in the corners.

“Again, Antony, if you ever sell this place, I’ll happily buy it off you.” Thomas sighed as Antony came toward him with two carafes.

“You tell me that every time you visit. Believe me, the estate outside Salisbury is much nicer. Which do you prefer? Brandy or port?” Antony offered.

“Port please.” Thomas gestured to the right carafe.

Antony turned away and poured the glasses, giving Thomas a small amount of time to analyze his friend’s features. He hadn’t been able to discern it before because of the meshed mask they had to wear when fencing, but there was a permanent line in Antony’s face, between his brows, as though he had grown accustomed to frowning over the last few days.

“What’s wrong, Antony?” Thomas asked as he took the glass from his friend’s proffered hand. “Something has upset you.”

“It is Miss Viola.” Antony sighed as he turned away and sat in a chair nearby. He leaned forward and sipped his brandy, resting his elbows on his knees.

“What about her?” Thomas asked, concern lacing his voice.

“I came to something of a realization today when I visited her.” Antony’s eyes were firmly on his glass.

“Which is?” Thomas waited as the silence stretched out. Antony seemed unwilling to reply as he kept sipping the brandy. “Come on, Antony. You know you can tell me anything.”

“It’s just . . . ah.” Antony shook his head, as though angry at himself. “I realized today that I am in love with Miss Viola.”

“In love?” Thomas asked, sitting forward. At the note of shock in his voice, Antony looked up with alarm in his features. “I didn’t mean

to sound so shocked."

"Are you sure?" Antony frowned.

"It's just . . . it is very quick." Thomas struggled for the right words.

"Oh, and how would you describe your feelings for Miss Constance?" Antony asked. "Would you describe them as anything less?"

"I . . . well . . ." Thomas struggled. Is that what he felt? Was it love? He preferred her company to anybody else's, and he couldn't stand the thought of her marrying another man. Even if it wasn't love yet, it was infatuation, and he was quickly on the way to love. "I suppose not."

"I guess when it's the right person, you know." Antony shrugged. "Someone told me as much in Singapore once."

"Pearls of wisdom from across the world?" Thomas asked. "You

must be wiser than anyone I know by now, Antony. You've travelled far and wide, more than any Englishman I think."

"So it seems, but none of that advice can help me now." Antony's face turned sad again. "You said I win at everything. Well, I fear I am about to lose the one thing I truly want. At Somerset House, Miss Viola told me she was in love with another."

This news did not particularly surprise Thomas, but it still gutted him for Antony's sake. He pinched the bridge of his nose, thinking back to the sight of the Marquess of Devonshire with Viola.

"My friend." He leaned forward, catching Antony's gaze. "The Marquess of Devonshire visited Viola today, with flowers."

"What flowers?" Antony asked, frowning.

"Does that matter!?" Thomas laughed at the idea.

"It matters." Antony narrowed his eyes.

“Lilies,” Thomas explained, remembering the sight of them in Viola’s hands.

“Well,” Antony scoffed, “I know she wouldn’t like that.”

“Antony, I am trying to give you a warning,” Thomas spoke carefully, saying each word with hesitation. “Perhaps the man she is in love with is Devonshire?”

“Hmm, perhaps.” Antony sat back in his chair and lifted the glass back to his lips. “But everything I know about Miss Viola makes that hard to believe. They do not suit.”

“Perhaps not.” Thomas wasn’t certain. “I’m very sorry, Antony.”

“She feels something for me, I’m sure of it. That’s what’s so strange.” Antony appeared to be speaking to himself more than to Thomas.

“What do you mean?” Thomas asked. Seeing that Antony was getting through his brandy rather quickly, Thomas stood and picked

up the carafe before topping up his friend's glass.

"Thanks." Antony nodded to him. "Let's just say that when I saw her today it was apparent that she is not indifferent to me. It's as though she's holding back from me."

"Why would she do that?" Thomas retook his seat, feeling more confused with each passing thing Antony said.

"I don't know." Antony shook his head, appearing helpless. "She . . . she painted me into her latest painting, Thomas."

"She did what?" This news made Thomas smile.

It seems Antony has a reason to hold onto hope after all.

"She put me in her painting, right next to her," Antony repeated, revealing a small smile himself. "Why would she do that if she was not interested?"

"I don't know, in truth," Thomas agreed as he sipped his port.

“What if . . .” An idea occurred to Thomas, one that was not nice to think of.

“What is it?” Antony asked. “Something just struck you. What is it?”

“Devonshire,” Thomas said the words with something of dread in him. “I do not trust that man. If you think Miss Viola is holding back from you, and I saw him there today, visiting her . . . why do I feel that he is behind it?”

“He is a foul man, but I don’t understand what his motive for messing with Miss Viola would be, Thomas,” Antony disagreed. “I think it a fanciful idea, as much as I wish it were true.”

“No, listen.” Thomas moved to the edge of his seat again. “While you were away, many stories have circulated London about Devonshire.”

“Such as what?” Antony gestured for him to continue.

“Such as taking a mistress who claimed that she was controlled by him. She claimed that she never wanted to sully her family’s name, yet he persuaded her. I know her brother quite well, and he said it was as though his sister had been manipulated, shaped into someone else,” Thomas said the words carefully, watching Antony’s expression darken.

“What do you mean by ‘manipulated’?” Antony’s voice had lowered.

“Just that, manipulating her into doing things her brother said were completely out of her character to do. I wouldn’t put anything past that man.” Despite Thomas’ fervor, he could see Antony didn’t readily believe him.

“I think you might just be believing the gossip a little too much,” Antony said with a smile. “You shouldn’t believe everything you hear.”

“Perhaps not.” Thomas had taken hold of the idea though, and he wasn’t going to let go of it easily now. “Well, putting that aside for a

minute, for Miss Viola to put you in her painting, she clearly is not indifferent to you. So, what will you do?"

Antony stared down at his brandy glass for a minute without replying.

"I heard some advice today that might help you," Thomas said, disturbing the quiet. "The Earl of Coleshire told me that if I want Miss Constance then I must try to prove to her that I am the one worth fighting for. Perhaps you should do the same?"

"Yes." Antony looked up with a smile. "Rest assured, Thomas, I'm not giving up on Miss Viola yet." He downed what was left in his glass.

Chapter 18

Viola

Viola stood staring at the mirror for some time as the maid finished attending to her hair. It was exactly the kind of material she had always wanted. Rather than all the muted whites and creams her mother put her in, this new gown was Pomona green. The satin shone in the mirror, contrasting her hair brilliantly.

On the last visit to the modiste, Viola had taken the opportunity to change her material without her mother noticing. Even now, Jane had no idea what gown Viola was going to wear. As usual, she took far more interest in Constance's preparations than Viola's.

The Marquess of Devonshire had told her that to stand out and be noticed by Mr. Bennett, she would have to start dressing a little bolder. He said it in passing at first, but then he kept saying it, again and again until Viola was convinced that he was right.

Not that she minded on this occasion. It was something she had always wanted, to wear a bolder dress, the kind that Constance could pull off in company.

Perhaps it is time for a change.

So far, the Marquess' ideas hadn't amounted to much. Tonight, it was the Viscountess of Haywood's ball, and Viola had to hope that one of his ideas would prove fruitful. The next day Constance was going to meet Mr. Bennett's parents, and surely from that moment on all of Viola's hopes would be lost.

As the maid wandered off, Viola stood there for a little while longer, fiddling with the dress. Now it came to the time, it was difficult to take a step out of that door. She liked to hide at these events; it was what she had always done. *This* was a step into unchartered territory.

As she flattened the skirt, she found her mind wandering, hoping that people would like how she looked in the dress.

I wonder if the Marquess of Salisbury will like it?

The moment she thought it, she lifted her gaze to stare at her

own eyes in the mirror.

Why did I think that?

She reasoned she just liked being in somebody's good opinion; that had to be it. Yet thinking of the Marquess made her lift her chin a little higher, and she walked out of the room, descending the staircase quickly.

She could hear murmurs coming from the drawing room, where her father, mother, and Constance were talking. There was animated conversation. After all, the Viscountess of Haywood was known for her extravagant balls, and it would probably be the event of the season.

As Viola stepped into the room, she held her breath, waiting for her family's reaction, but to her dismay, they didn't even notice her enter. She let her chin drop back down again, but she pushed her hair behind her ear, revealing her scar as she listened to the chatter.

"Oh, how lovely you look, Constance. No doubt Mr. Bennett will

be there tonight," Jane was prattling once again. "And then tomorrow you are to meet his parents. Is this not good news, my love?" She turned to Archibald who nodded, clearly not bothering to attempt to reply to her, for she was in full flow. "Oh, surely we can call this a courtship now! You are to meet Baron and Baroness Gerresborough."

"Do calm down, Mother," Constance pleaded. "You will make yourself ill." Viola looked at Constance as she spoke. The two of them had resolved their argument from the other day by mutually agreeing not to speak of it again.

"I'll be ill if we run late again. Oh, where is Viola?" Jane fluttered her hands in the air as she turned to the door.

As Jane locked eyes with her, Viola heard the joy in her voice change.

"Viola . . ." Her eyes were wide, the smile gone as she looked her up and down.

Viola had to fight against everything in her body not to fidget

under her mother's scrutinizing stare.

"You changed your material!" Jane's voice was high-pitched.

"You noticed." Viola held a small smile.

"Viola!" Constance was on her feet and running toward her, fussing with the skirt instantly. "Oh, you look beautiful."

"Thank you, Constance." Viola smiled at her sister as they linked arms together.

"But . . . look at her." Jane gestured to Viola, making the two sisters stiffen. "It is very bold. She will stand out now."

"What is wrong with that, Jane?" Archibald's voice clearly startled his wife as she whipped her head around.

"Nothing, it is just . . ." Jane stopped talking as she stepped toward Viola.

Viola flinched as her mother's hand did her usual thing, pulling the curls of her hair out from behind her ear and down across her cheek.

"Jane." Archibald's voice appeared closer to her, warning her to stop. Viola looked between her parents as her mother's hand stilled around the curls of hair.

It was an awful moment. Viola could see the emotion in her mother's eyes. It looked a little like shame.

How could she look at me like that?

Viola was not sure what gave her the confidence to speak. Perhaps it was because she was wearing a bolder dress, or perhaps it was Constance's comforting arm in hers, or maybe it was her father's evident anger at her mother. All she knew was that she had to say something.

"Can you truly not bear to look at me, Mother, without my hair covering up this scar?" Her voice trembled as she spoke. She felt

Constance's arm squeeze hers.

Jane jumped back as though she had been struck.

"Don't be silly." She tried to smile, but it faltered quickly. "I was just . . ." She trailed off.

"Trying to hide it. As you always do," Viola said, thinking of the Marquess of Salisbury's words from the other day.

Because when I look at you, I see someone exceptionally beautiful.

She hadn't believed him, but those words lingered now, creating a warm feeling inside of her.

What if he did mean it?

"No, I was only . . ." Jane looked at Archibald, as if searching for his help.

"It's all right, Mother, you do not need to explain." Viola turned

with Constance's arm through hers. "Shall we go? We don't want to be late."

As Viola walked away with her sister beside her, she was aware of Constance smiling.

"Well done, Viola," Constance said quietly as they moved into the entrance hall. "It really is a beautiful dress."

"Thank you, Constance." Viola turned to her with a genuine smile. "It means the world to me that you think so."

Constance

Constance kept her arm threaded firmly through Viola's as they entered the ballroom with their parents behind them. Constance was determined to put a little distance between them and Jane that evening if she could orchestrate it.

Jane had barely said a word through the entire carriage journey. She had kept a frown upon her features for most of it and kept her gaze down. Unusually, Archibald took up conversation, trying to keep

spirits high while his wife sulked.

It was only when they had reached Haywood Manor and descended the carriage that Jane tried to renew her spirits. For a minute, she adjusted Constance's skirt. Constance let her, happy to see Jane return to some of her usual cheer, but when Jane reached for Viola, clearly subconsciously about to adjust her hair, she reared back.

Constance had not seen whether her mother had stopped because of her own decision or because of Viola's glare. Yet she was still pleased Jane had halted.

Perhaps things are about to change.

Constance was thrilled to see the Pomona green dress Viola had ordered, and it had given Constance hope that maybe this evening her sister would feel a little more comfortable at the ball. Perhaps tonight, not so many people would whisper about her, the lady who hovered in the shadows because of her marked face. Constance had longed to see that day.

As they walked into the ballroom, Constance gasped at the display that was around them. The Viscountess of Haywood was already known for her extravagant and rather exuberant events, but clearly, she was hoping to outdo herself. If she put on enough of a performance, the ball would be talked of in the scandal sheets for the next few days as the event of the season. The Viscountess was generally thought of as a kind person, but proud as well. The demonstration of her pride was in the exaggerated décor.

“Have you ever seen anything like it?” Constance murmured to Viola, as both of their gazes danced across the room in awe.

“Only in paintings,” Viola answered softly, with equal wonder in her voice.

Before Constance was a grand spectacle indeed. The ballroom was already decorated in gold and cream hues, with standing candelabras down the side of the room and swinging chandeliers hanging from the ceiling. It was like a fine stage at the theatre, and the people were the actors in a performance. At the far end of the room, elevated on a platform, were violinists and sopranos, all dressed

in shimmering gold outfits. They wore headdresses that were not only laced with flowers, but shaped into different woodland creatures. Some were birds, some foxes, others were rabbits. The tunes they performed were both lyrical and beautiful.

Around the room wandered servers with trays of sparkling wine and punch, dressed in the same glowing golden outfits, though their headdresses were draped with leaves from different trees: ash, sycamore, silver birch, and oak. In the center of the room, a space had been cleared for dancing, and there were already a number of participants taking their place.

Constance couldn't stop the excitement that coursed through her at the sight of it all. Tonight was to be a good night, and that thought only grew more certain when she spied a certain gentleman's face across the room.

Mr. Bennett looked up from his punch glass and his blue eyes found hers. The moment their gaze connected was like a bolt of lightning. Constance gasped at the power of it.

“Is something wrong, Constance?” Viola asked from her side, evidently none the wiser as to what had been the cause.

“Nothing is wrong,” Constance said, feeling her smile growing ridiculously wide. “In fact . . . everything feels very right.” She was aware that Viola’s arm stiffened within her grasp, but she paid it no heed. She was too busy thinking of Mr. Bennett as he placed his punch glass down and crossed the room toward her.

Constance stepped toward him, hoping to meet him in the middle. The move left her parents behind, but she dragged Viola forward with her.

“Constance, what are you—”

“It is Mr. Bennett,” she said quietly, just before he appeared in front of her.

“Miss Constance.” He bowed deeply to her and nodded his head to Viola as well. “Miss Viola.”

“Mr. Bennett,” Constance replied, feeling a blush fill her cheeks as she curtsied. His eyes were so fixed on her that she had never felt so analyzed before. It was as though his eyes weren’t really looking at her appearance, but somewhere inside her.

“You look quite simply stunning, Miss Constance,” Mr. Bennett said, his smile taking over his handsome features in a way that left Constance quite breathless.

“Thank you,” she said the words confidently, though she was certain her insides had gone shuddery with excitement. Constance wished to compliment him on his own appearance, for he had chosen a tailcoat and breeches in a midnight blue color. The effect was astonishing, complementing the blue hue of his eyes, yet she felt the words waver on her tongue. She would only give him such a compliment when they were dancing alone together, away from Viola who was listening intently to their conversation.

The thought of her sister pulled Constance from her constant staring at Mr. Bennett. She looked her sister’s way and saw a deep frown. Her chin was lowered, and her hair once again masked the scar

on her cheek. Constance was gutted at the sight. She wished she could return Viola to the moment in the house before they had left, where she had defied Mother's ministrations of her hair.

"Viola and I were just remarking on the ballroom." Constance sought a mutual topic, hoping to draw Viola into conversation. "We have never quite seen the like before."

"Yes," Mr. Bennett agreed. "Though there are so many dancers here tonight, I fear there may be accidents," he said with humor and a smile.

"I hope you are wrong." Constance smiled too, tempted to laugh. "If someone were to fall over in all this beauty, it would be quite . . ." She struggled for the right word. Awkward? Out of place?

"Humorous?" Mr. Bennett offered with a twinkle in his eye.

"No! You are quite mischievous, Mr. Bennett," she reprimanded, though still she smiled.

“Allow me my fun,” he said quickly. “The Viscountess of Haywood is so concerned with making her events the best of the season that it would give me cause to smile if something happened to lower her pride. Just a little,” he added, softening the meaning of his words.

“You are cruel,” Constance said with a shake of her head.

“I am merely jesting.” He shrugged. “But if it is the other dancers’ safety you fear for, then we best give them an example of how to go on. Mustn’t we?” he asked and offered his hand. “Your dance card, Miss Constance?”

Constance felt her breath hitch in her throat as she disentangled her arm from Viola’s and went for her dance card, passing it over to Mr. Bennett.

“You are eager,” Constance teased. “I have barely made five steps into this room and you are already reserving a dance?”

“Two, if I can, so yes, I am very eager indeed,” he said the last

words in a whisper as he handed the dance card back to her, letting his gaze linger on her for a moment. The deep blue of his gaze made a shiver run up her spine, but not from the cold. It was a different kind of shiver altogether, one that was thrilled by how close he stood to her. One that wanted him to come closer still.

Constance let her eyes wander down to the card, seeing that Mr. Bennett had reserved two dances with her, just as he had said, and one of those dances was a waltz.

“A waltz?” she asked, looking back up at him, seeing the way his crooked smile grew.

“Yes, it is my favorite dance,” he explained, though there was clearly something else to his thinking.

“Mine too,” she assured as she tilted her head to the side, wondering what else he was trying to tell her. “I feel, Mr. Bennett, that there is something else about you choosing a waltz that you are not telling me.”

“Oh, it is a selfish reason, therefore I best keep it to myself.” He laughed at himself.

“You cannot taunt me so!” She laughed too. “If you tell me there is a secret involved, then I will have no choice but to pester you to hear it, for you have teased me with it.”

“Very well.” He laughed and stepped nearer to her. Constance suddenly remembered Viola was by her side, but Mr. Bennett did not seem to care. He lowered his voice to a whisper, so quiet that Viola surely could not hear. “The secret is . . . I don’t think I could bear seeing you dance the waltz with another.”

As he stepped back, Constance felt that shiver return. This time it was coupled with tingles that spread through her body as he stepped back and connected their gazes once more. It was abrupt, but now Constance didn’t seem to care that Viola was at her side and had witnessed such a public display.

All Constance cared about were those tingles, and how much she wished the dances would hurry up so that she could feel what it

would be like to dance a waltz in Mr. Bennett's arms.

Chapter 19

Viola

Viola was standing beside Jane, feeling as though she were suffocating.

"Doesn't she look beautiful?" Jane asked at her side, her gaze fixed on Constance.

"Yes, Mother," Viola replied quietly. "She always does." Viola had to suffer Jane's constant praise of Constance, as together they watched her sister and Mr. Bennett dance.

It was the waltz. The sight of Constance being so close to him, within the circle of his arms with his hand on her waist and their other hands clasped together . . . it was painful indeed. The first half of the dance, this was the thought that consumed Viola, the agony of having to see the man she had thought so much of so intimately close to Constance. Yet, during the second half of the dance, Viola could only think of Jane and her continuous admiration of Constance.

"Surely we will have a wedding before the season is out." Jane

giggled to herself. Viola thought that Jane barely realized who she was speaking to. All that mattered was complimenting Constance, no matter who the listener was.

Archibald approached them, and evidently having caught the end of what Jane had said, he passed a glass of sparkling wine into Viola's hands, his face set into a firm frown of his own.

"Viola," he said quietly, so softly that it did not disturb Jane, whose attention was still fixed on the dance floor.

"Yes?" Viola said as she took the glass from him.

"You must ignore her." His words, though gentle, held something firm in them. It was as though he was pleading with her.

"I believe the old adage of 'easier said than done' was never truer than at this moment, Father." She saw her words brought him no comfort. He only winced in response. His eyes went to Jane and then to Constance and Mr. Bennett on the dance floor. Viola watched too, feeling her stomach twist in pain at the spectacle.

“Jane, I am just going to take Viola for a turn around the room,” Archibald said, taking his daughter’s arm before she could even think about objecting. Jane barely seemed to notice; she nodded in their direction before turning to a circle of friends and gushing about Constance to them.

Viola concentrated on sipping her wine as her father took her around the room, weaving her between the couples.

“Is all well, Father?” she asked when they were some distance away from Jane.

“I am not sure,” Archibald said, bringing her to a stop on the other side of the dance floor. It allowed Viola a new view of her sister and Mr. Bennett. The grasp he had on her waist was very intimate indeed. “Viola, do you remember how you got your scar?”

The question was so sudden that Viola looked sharply back at him. They did not speak about the scar in public, it was an unspoken rule.

“Of course I do,” she said quickly. “The carriage accident.”

“But do you remember *exactly* what happened?” he asked, clearly having an ulterior motive,though Viola was none the wiser.

“Yes, Father, I do,” she replied, turning her gaze back down at her glass. She remembered all too vividly how bad the accident had been, with the carriage rolling over onto its side. She had only been twelve at the time, but Constance, only ten, had been exceedingly small for her age and had not yet had a growth spurt. When the carriage rolled, Constance was flung into the air. Viola remembered catching her sister mid fall and rolling the two of them over, cushioning her sister’s plummet. By protecting Constance, Viola had landed on the broken and fractured part of the carriage. The shattered wood had given her many scratches and splinters, with the worst one cutting her face, resulting in the scar.

She swallowed at the memory, trying to clear the pain of it.

“You protected Constance,” Archibald said carefully.

“I remember,” she said, though she could not look up from her glass.

“Constance remembers it too. Every day since, she has remembered it,” Archibald continued, making Viola frown all the more. “It’s why she’s always at your side, always looking out for you.”

“I know, Father,” Viola assured with a nod. “Why are we discussing this now?”

“Because . . .” Archibald paused. The awkwardness of it made Constance look up. She saw her father was shifting between his feet. There was something in his jaw too, a kind of twitch, betraying concern. “Because I never want you to take out your mother’s mistakes on your sister.”

These words made Viola reel. She nearly dropped her glass.

“Whatever do you mean?” she asked, feeling her face settle into a glower as hard as stone.

“I know your mother has made mistakes, many of them. No matter what is said to her, she seems oblivious to the real world, sometimes. I cannot always explain her behavior, Viola.” Archibald seemed to be pleading with her. “But it has not escaped my notice that you and Constance argue much more of late. I want to make sure that your mother’s . . . well, the way that she is, doesn’t affect your and Constance’s relationship.”

Seeing the fear in her father’s eyes made a chasm open up in Viola.

“Of course, Father. I promise to never let that happen,” she said slowly, trying to offer a small smile.

“Good, I am relieved to hear it.” Archibald sighed and looked down at her glass. “Do you need a top up?”

“Yes, please.” She passed him the glass, but held onto the stem for a moment as he tried to take it. “Father, why mention this now? Why here?” She looked around the room. Unwillingly, her gaze drew

back to Constance and Mr. Bennett before returning to her father.

"It just felt like the right time." Archibald sighed. "Perhaps I am tired of listening to your mother's antics. Perhaps . . ." He paused, turning his gaze towards Constance and Mr. Bennett. "Something else worries me."

He offered her one last smile before taking the glass from her and crossing the room.

Viola stood as still as a statue for a minute, unable to lift her gaze to follow her father's path or to look at Constance and Mr. Bennett again. Everything her father had said made so much sense, and it left her feeling in pain, in more agony than even the sight of Constance and Mr. Bennett together had caused.

What am I doing?

She eventually tore her gaze off the floor and focused on the dancers, only this time her gaze settled on Constance's face.

She looks so happy.

Her beautiful smile was wide indeed, her hazel eyes practically sparkling. She had never seen her sister so happy.

Why on earth am I trying to jeopardize that?

The guilt was overwhelming. For a moment, Viola shifted between her feet and let her gaze go back and forth across the guests around her. Never had she felt so alone, or so ashamed.

She needed to get out of there. If only she could take some air, the fresh evening could help to clear her thoughts. She whipped her head round, searching for the door, but she found someone else instead.

The Marquess of Salisbury was walking toward her. Apparently, he was having trouble. He was clearly trying to extricate himself from talking to other guests, but there was no mistaking where his coffee-colored eyes were looking at: her.

Viola was in no mood to talk to him. Not after the conversation she had just had with her father.

She flicked her head back the other way, turning far from him. She found a door that she knew from previous visits to Haywood Manor would lead to a corridor she could take to get outside and made her way toward it. So determined in her goal, her heels clicked rather loudly against the floor, fortunately masked by the chatter and the music. She did not look back at Constance again.

She was about to reach for the door when someone stepped in her way.

It was the Marquess of Devonshire.

Viola had to come to a halt and jump back, fearful of coming to a collision.

“My lord!” she said with surprise and offered a quick curtsy.

“Miss Viola.” He bowed, his eyes fixed on her.

“If you would excuse me, I was just going for some fresh air.” She pointed to the doorway, about to step around him, but he somehow got in her way again.

“Before you go, share this dance with me.” It was an instruction, a practical order from him, not a request.

“I beg your pardon?” Viola said in shock, her eyebrows rising.

“We wish to make Miss Constance and Mr. Bennett jealous, yes?” he spoke, as though it were obvious. “What better way to accomplish that than for us to show her that you could someday be a duchess. You remember our plan, Miss Viola?”

Our plan?

Viola was racking her brains, but she couldn’t quite remember how this was ever *their* plan in the first place. Had it not been *his* plan from the start? She wasn’t sure anymore.

“Not tonight.” Viola shook her head. “Please excuse me, my lord. I really must take some fresh air.”

“What a shame,” he said, tilting his chin high and looking over her head, back at the dancers. “Mr. Bennett seems quite enraptured by your sister, does he not?” At his words, Viola stiffened, not wanting to hear it, yet confident she did not want to dance either. “Still, you are intending on refusing this dance?”

“Yes,” Viola said simply, watching the Marquess’ face as he seemed to tut and shake his head slightly. She looked around, wondering if anyone could overhear them, but all the other guests were too wrapped up in their own conversations.

“It’s best not to refuse me, Miss Viola,” he said, his voice drawling.

“And why not?” she asked.

“Ah, I see Miss Constance and Mr. Bennett have just returned to your mother. She looks quite delighted, doesn’t she? I do not think I

have ever seen your mother so happy," he said the words nonchalantly, but Viola felt everything twist inside her.

My mother is never as happy as when she is looking at Constance.

"So, Miss Viola, that dance?" He let the question hang in the air and offered his hand to her.

Viola could not see a reason why she did it, but she took his hand. She let him lead her toward the dance floor, though she kept her gaze down the whole way. Only when he took her hand and led her through the movements did she lift her eyes. At the edge of the dance floor, she could see the Marquess of Salisbury. Disappointment was etched into his features.

At the sight of that sadness, Viola felt a new wave of fear inside of her.

What is wrong with me tonight!?

For a minute, she and the Marquess danced in silence. When he

did open his mouth to speak, Viola felt more and more unsettled about her decision to dance with him.

"Miss Constance is looking this way. I think our plan is working," he murmured as they circled one another in the quadrille.

"I am struggling to remember this being 'our plan', my lord." Her words only brought a soft chuckle from him.

"It most definitely was, or have you forgotten our conversation in Somerset House?" His voice was good-humored, as though he were trying to persuade her as a friend, reminding her of something that had just slipped her mind.

"No . . . yes, I mean I . . ." She trailed off and decided to focus on the dance instead. She could remember the Marquess suggesting the idea to her, and she also remembered agreeing to it. His words now insinuating that it was as much her idea as his own were confusing her.

He makes me feel as though I am losing my common sense.

“Yes, Miss Constance is looking this way an awful lot.” He seemed incredibly pleased by these words. “Try and smile, Miss Viola. Our plan will never work if you look so downhearted. Miss Constance has to believe that we are forming an attachment, after all.”

Viola wasn’t sure why she followed his instruction, but she did. She lifted her gaze to meet his and offered him a smile.

“There, much better,” he said, yet as his hand took hers and they did another circle around one another, that grasp was too tight for comfort. Viola winced at the power there, though she tried to hide it with her fake smile.

She allowed her gaze to wander to the edge of the dance floor and gasped at the sight. Constance and Mr. Bennett were both staring their way.

Isn’t this what I wanted?

She wasn’t so sure anymore. The guilt was growing worse, and

her father's words kept coming back to her.

Beside Constance, she could see Jane was still staring at her youngest daughter. Archibald was on her mother's other side, pinching the bridge of his nose, apparently despairing at something she was saying.

For a moment, it was as though time slowed down for Viola, and she could see the tableaux of her family much clearer than before. It was certain; Jane would only ever look at Constance with that utter devotion, but Constance's eyes were on Viola.

Why am I doing this?

If she could have walked off the floor there and then, she would have done it, but the momentary hesitation in her dancing made the Marquess' hand tighten on hers as he led her into a promenade walk in the rehearsed dance sequence.

"Is there something wrong, Miss Viola?" he asked, his voice lilting with an emotion Viola did not recognize. "For a minute there, I

thought you were going to leave the floor."

She said nothing. She just held her body so stiff that she felt a knot growing worse and worse in her stomach.

"That would be a mistake," he assured. "Then neither of us would get what we want."

"What does that mean?" She flicked her head toward him, but he just offered a self-indulgent smile as the dance came to an end. Viola hurried to curtsy as he bowed, and then he escorted her off the floor.

"I think we should dance again later this evening, Miss Viola. A little more work, and I am sure our plan will work yet." He nodded at her in parting, leaving her alone at the side of the floor.

Viola watched him go, certain she had never felt less in control of what she was doing.

I need that fresh air!

She turned on the spot, determined to renew her desire to step outside into the evening air, yet as she turned, again she found someone blocking her path.

This time, there were two people.

Archibald had to have disentangled himself from Jane's company, as he was now standing before her beside another gentleman: the Marquess of Salisbury.

"Ah, Viola." Archibald stepped toward her, giving her no chance to leave for the outside without appearing very rude. "Beautiful dancing."

"Thank you, Father," Viola said without focus. Her eyes were much more concerned with the Marquess of Salisbury who was staring at her. "Good evening, my lord." She curtsied to him.

"And to you, Miss Viola," he said, holding her gaze.

"The Marquess and I were just remarking what a shame it was

that we don't see you dancing more, Viola," Archibald said with a smile, clearly aiming at something.

"You need partners to dance, Father, and my offers are scarce," she said, subconsciously holding tighter to the dance card that was tied with a bow at her wrist. It was empty.

"Then we must remedy the problem," the Marquess of Salisbury said with a smile. "May I have the next dance, Miss Viola?"

The question was asked softly, contrasting the way the Marquess of Devonshire had demanded a dance from Viola, that she was wrong footed for a moment. She thought about declining and trying to step outside again, but one glance her father's way showed Archibald had a stern countenance. It was a silent instruction to accept.

"Yes, of course," she spoke quickly.

The Marquess of Salisbury offered her his hand and she took it. When their fingers touched, she was shocked at the gentleness and the heat. Even through the long white gloves she wore, she could feel the

warmth in those fingers as he led her toward the dance floor.

As they took up a central position on the floor, she tried to keep her chin low and her hair across her cheek, but the moment he placed a hand on her waist, to begin the *La Boulangere* dance, she looked up again.

For a brief moment, that touch had swept away all the agony and pain she was contending with that night. It replaced them with something else altogether. A feeling of . . . tenderness.

Chapter 20

Antony

Viola is quite intoxicating this evening.

This was all Antony could think of as he took both of Viola's hands in his.

When she had first entered the ballroom that evening and he had spied her across the room, he had been so stunned that he had broken off the conversation he had been sharing with the Earl of Coleshire mid-sentence, much to the Earl's amusement, who had laughed for the next five minutes at the way Antony stared across the room. The Pomona green was so startling and striking, contrasting anything that Viola had worn before, and Antony was certain he was seeing a new side to her. The green complimented her auburn hair in a way that made it stand out all the more.

Now, as they prepared to dance together, he was incredibly tempted to reach out to the one lock that still curled down in front of her scar, and push it back behind her ear, feeling the silky curl for a moment, but he held himself back.

As they began to dance, Antony could see Viola kept flicking her eyes up to his face, but at other times she looked down, evidently self-conscious.

You never need be self-conscious with me.

The words were on the tip of his tongue, but he held them back, reminding himself that Viola loved another. She was not his.

“You are quite bewitching to look at this evening, Miss Viola.” He saw his words did not have the desired effect. She looked up at him as he led her in a circle, raising just one eyebrow, as though she didn’t believe him. “Is it that you do not believe my compliment or that you are unused to them that bothers you?” he asked with a smile.

“Both, my lord,” she said, lowering the eyebrow again.

“I told you before that I always wanted to be honest with you,” he assured her, feeling her slim fingers within his own as she held a little tighter to his palm. That extra touch made a jolt of excitement

leap in his stomach. “I am being honest now. The Pomona green dress suits you well. In fact, every other woman here pales in comparison.”

“Now I know you must be jesting,” she said, lifting her chin a little more. The sight of it gave him confidence.

“Not about this,” he assured her, making his voice deeper than before. Her lips quirked into a small smile before they flattened again.

They moved in the dance. As per the sequence, they had to temporarily swap partners. As Antony took the Viscountess of Haywood into a circle, he kept his eyes on Viola. He was elated to see she did the same, her hazel gaze on him.

When they returned to one another, Antony felt the thrill of having her in his arms course through him. For a minute, they said nothing. They just continued to dance together, and this time, she didn’t subconsciously keep looking down. At all times, she kept her eyes on his.

When he took her arm in his in order to promenade round in a

circle with the other dancers, his arm brushed her waist. He was watching closely enough that he saw the way her cheeks brushed crimson.

Each move made him more and more confident. He had reason to hope yet.

As they came face to face again, walking around one another, he still could not stop staring at her.

“You have a stare like no other, my lord. It is unrelenting,” she remarked, flicking her head so that the curl of hair stayed across her face.

“Only for you, it seems,” he said quickly, making her eyes widen. “I have been meaning to ask, by the way. Why do you do that?” He gestured to her hair as they circled one another.

“Do what?” she asked, innocently.

“Hide from the world.” He pointed to her hair again,

emphasizing his meaning.

“You would know why if you lived a day beside me, my lord.” Her voice deepened. There was sadness behind it.

“In case you haven’t noticed, that is what I want to do. Yet I rather had my hopes on more than one day.” He was pushing the boundary with his words, he knew it, but she blushed again, nevertheless.

“You baffle me,” she said softly, tilting her head to the side as they took one another’s arms and faced each other.

“In what way?” he asked, enjoying the feeling of her analyzing eyes on him.

“I suppose you are unlike any other man I have met.”

“How fortunate. For you are unlike any other lady I have met,” he said with a smile, watching as her lips quirked into a smile of her own.

“I look like no other lady, you mean.” She was degrading herself again.

“That is true, but not in the way you think,” he said quickly, adopting a firmer tone. “Believe me, Miss Viola. I intend to tell you that you are beautiful, and to keep telling you until you believe me.”

“I don’t think I’d believe it readily,” she said just as quickly.

“Then I will have to persuade you of it,” he reassured, taking her hand in his as they walked around one another. “What I meant by my earlier comment though, was the fact that by talking to you, I know you are unlike any other lady I have ever met. *That* is why I am so fascinated by you.”

“Fascinated?” Her head flicked his way, those hazel eyes turning wider than before.

“Yes, fascinated,” he assured, still smiling at her, despite her evident surprise.

“You are persistent.” She laughed to herself and shook her head slightly. “So persistent that I’m hesitating on whether I should begin to believe you.”

“You should believe me in my admiration for you. I am persistent, yes,” he agreed, “but I also like to think that for my persistence I am gradually learning to know you better than any other man here.” He saw his words shocked her even more, with her lips parting completely. “Well, perhaps there is one other gentleman who knows you better.”

“Who?” she asked, a frown appearing on her brow.

“The Marquess of Devonshire.” He saw his words made her reel completely this time. “When he visited you the other day, I understand he brought lilies. Yet I am confident they are not a flower you would have favored, which makes me doubt he knows you very well.”

“Why are we talking about the Marquess of Devonshire?” she

asked.

“Well, I am presuming . . .” He paused, building up the courage to speak. “That he is the gentleman you spoke of the other day, when you told me you loved another.”

She looked speechless for a minute. He held his breath as he waited for her answer.

“You are mistaken,” she said as their dance came to a close.

“I am sorry?” he asked, still holding onto her hand.

“He is not the man I am in love with.” She shook her head firmly.

“He’s not?” Antony had to remind himself to extricate his hand and bow now that the dance had come to a close. He was more confused than before. He had seen no other gentleman dance with Viola nor show an interest in her. Could it be that he had missed another gentleman’s attentions entirely? Could he really be so blind?

After she curtsied, she offered her hand for him to escort her from the floor. He took the hand, but he did not move away.

“Stay for a second dance,” he pleaded. She looked unsure, her eyes darting between their hands clasped together and the exchange of dancers that was now taking place on the floor. “Please, Miss Viola.”

He offered the softest squeeze to their hands, wanting to show through his palm alone that he couldn’t bear to part from her company just yet.

She nodded, allowing him to escort her into the positions for a much more intimate waltz.

Viola

Viola was confused, incredibly so as the Marquess of Salisbury placed one of his hands on her lower back and took her palm in his other. She liked it. The warmth of those hands on her was reassuring. So different from when she had danced with the Marquess of

Devonshire.

She wasn't sure what to say to him now. The fact that he'd presumed the man she was in love with was the Marquess of Devonshire was hardly a surprise. Was that not the illusion that the Marquess of Devonshire had wanted to build? Yet . . . something about it felt so wrong that she was hollow, as though something inside her were now missing.

She could not allow the Marquess of Salisbury to think she was attached to the Marquess od Devonshire, not for one second. Now, as they danced, she had the opportunity to tell him the truth, to tell him who she really loved.

Who do I love?

Her gaze flicked away from him momentarily, in search of Mr. Bennett across the room, but after just a few seconds of searching, she abandoned the endeavor. Suddenly, it did not seem so important to her to look for the gentleman. Why was she seeking out his company?

Am I really in love with Mr. Bennett?

"I see, Miss Viola, that whoever has your heart is worthy of it." The Marquess of Salisbury's words made her flinch in his arms. She held a little tighter to his hand, needing that connection.

"What makes you say that?" she asked, almost nervously.

"For you are incredibly loyal to him." He offered a small smile. "It must be nice for him, to have a lady as yourself so devoted to him. And surely no man undeserving could earn such sentiment from you."

Was she devoted to the idea of Mr. Bennett though? She had been in turmoil all night, her guilt overwhelming. Now, dancing with the Marquess of Salisbury, aware of the strength in those arms as he held her, she was not so sure she liked Mr. Bennett very much at all.

She reasoned it had to be the wine; perhaps she had drunk a little too much and it was clouding her judgment.

"I do not wish to talk of him anymore." Viola shook her head.

“You do not?” The Marquess of Salisbury seemed surprised, raising his eyebrows.

“No,” she spoke firmly.

“Then, what would you like to talk about?” he asked, his smile growing a little wider.

She was tempted to talk of the dance, to confess to him that she felt very safe in his arms. To even tell him that since their last meeting she had painted his figure in yet another one of her paintings, yet she could not utter any of it.

“Tell me more of your travels,” she asked, turning her chin up to him and trying to be bolder in her conversation. He smiled instantly in response as her hair fell away from her face. “You have been to the Far East, I know, and we have spoken much of it. Where else have you been?”

“To the continent,” he said quickly. “One of my favorite places

has to be Paris."

"What is it like? I have seen paintings of the place." She hung onto his words, waiting to hear what he would say next.

"Trust me, Miss Viola," he assured her, clasping his fingers a little tighter over hers with the movement. It made Viola's breath hitch, just at the feeling of their palms pressed so tightly together. "No painting could compare to that place. Its beauty is like no other."

"It sounds like a remarkable place." She wished she could go herself as she listened to him speak of it.

It was as if she had started a ball rolling from a hill, because suddenly the Marquess of Salisbury started talking at length about Paris. He described the buildings to her, the gardens too. Of course, the majority of his conversation was about the art galleries and the paintings they had on show.

"I wish I could visit sometime," she said, as her laughter died after a jest that he had made about one of the galleries.

“Perhaps you will, some day,” he said, turning her around the room quite excellently.

“There is little chance of that.” She shook her head, “My father would never take me to the continent.”

“Then, perhaps *I* could take you someday?” he asked, tilting his head to the side.

Rather than look away from him, as she usually did when he made such comments, she held his stare on this occasion, too mesmerized by his words and him to even think of looking away.

“You would do that?” she asked, unable to lower her smile.

“I would take you to see all the beauties of the world. If you gave me the chance.” His words made a shuddery breath escape her, just as the music came to a close.

As he released her, stepping back to bow, Viola was certain her

legs were shaking, urging her to struggle in her curtsy. She had not wanted the warmth of those hands to part from her.

Yet . . . she had no choice.

He offered her his hand, and she took it eagerly. They were both quiet for a minute as he led her off the dance floor to the side of the room.

“I am about to be bold, Miss Viola, so I hope you will forgive me for it,” he whispered to her, earning her gaze as they came to a stop.

“Please carry on.” She smiled up at him, pleased when he returned that smile.

“Whoever the gentleman is that has won your heart, I must apologize to him someday. For I am not giving up now.” He released her hand. She felt cold without it.

“You’re not?” she asked.

“No. I’m going to fight for you. Because each time I am about to give up hope, you say something that gives me a little more hope again.” He bowed deeply to her.

She curtsied too, wishing she could say something that would make him stay, but her mind was too blank.

He held her gaze for a beat before slipping off between the other guests, disappearing between tailcoats and empire gowns. She was breathless as he left, and she placed a hand to her chest, trying to calm the mad breathing.

She was struggling to understand why she had ever rejected the Marquess of Salisbury in the first place.

Chapter 21

Constance

Constance had barely slept, for her excitement was overflowing. Today was the day that she was to meet Mr. Bennett's parents. Surely after today, their courtship would be deemed official.

She hurried out of the bed and flung back the curtains, her smile growing even greater when she saw how brightly the sun shone. With such a fair day ahead of them, their picnic would surely be a delightful one.

Before she could ring for her maid, there was a knock at the door.

"Come in." She turned round, surprised to see Viola standing in the door, wearing a dressing gown over her night robe. "Viola, is all well?" Constance rushed to her sister's side. Her sister's complexion was very pale, with heavy shadows under her eyes. "You look as if you have had as little sleep as I have." She giggled.

"I did not have much," Viola admitted, nodding as she stepped in

and closed the door behind her.

Constance took Viola's hand as soon as she was in the room and spun her around.

"Constance!" Viola complained but Constance just continued.

"I do not think I have ever been this happy." She giggled again. "Did you see Mr. Bennett and me last night?" she said as she stopped spinning Viola.

"A little," Viola said, stepping away, now appearing even paler than before.

"Oh, good gosh, Viola, are you ill? I am sorry, I just got caught up in my excitement," Constance rushed to explain as Viola took a seat on her ottoman.

"I am well. I think." Viola pushed her concerns away. "I have just had a troubled night's sleep. That is all."

“What has been troubling you?” Constance asked.

“Many things,” Viola admitted, her eyes focusing on her lap. Confused by Viola’s appearance in her room, Constance bustled to sit down beside her, urging Viola to make room for her.

“What’s wrong, Viola? I have to get ready soon,” she said with excitement. “Thomas will be here in two hours to collect me for the panic. I can hardly wait!”

“Yes, I can tell.” Viola looked up at her and offered a small smile. “You do look very happy.” The words spoken were a little wistful.

“Of course I am.” Constance sat back and tilted her head up to the sky. “I feel like the luckiest woman alive. Last night was a dream. Thomas, he is just . . . I’ve never known a man quite like him.”

“What are his thoughts on art?” Viola asked. The question was so abrupt, so different from Constance’s line of conversation, that she stared at her sister for a minute, lips parted in surprise.

“He doesn’t have strong feelings on it,” Constance said quietly. “He does not debate the masters as you and the Marquess of Salisbury do, anyway,” she admitted, remembering how when they had walked round Somerset House he had been much more interested in talking to her than looking at the art.

“He doesn’t travel much either, does he?” Viola asked.

Where is this conversation leading?

Constance sat forward again, fixing her sister with a curious gaze.

“Not really,” she said quietly. “You should have heard a conversation we shared last night about the toils of travelling to and from the countryside. He likes his parents’ country seat, but he was warning me ahead of our trip today that the ride is a bumpy one. He dislikes it very much.”

“He does?” Viola asked, her expression changing to one of disappointment. “He does not travel at all?”

“He much prefers London,” Constance said as she jumped to her feet, rushing across the room to her closet to pull out her gowns and decide what she was going to wear for the picnic. “Which suits me very well! He was saying how much he envies your friend, the other night.”

“What friend?” Viola asked, sitting bolt straight on the ottoman.

“Well, his friend too. The Marquess of Salisbury,” Constance practically repeated a conversation she’d had with Thomas the night before. “He was talking at length last night of the Marquess of Salisbury’s house here in town. Apparently, it is quite beautiful, the finest house, and decorated so smartly that you’ll never see anything like it. Thomas is positively jealous of it. He was wondering why the Marquess of Salisbury should have such a house when he barely spends any time in it, infinitely preferring to travel rather than be in London.”

Viola said nothing in reply. It prompted Constance to look back out of the closet toward her sister, to see Viola staring down at her lap

again, her lips pouted in apparent sadness.

“Did I say something to upset you?” Constance asked, fearing the answer.

“No, not at all.” Viola looked up and offered another smile, but it didn’t quite reach her eyes. “You were simply reinforcing something I think I already knew.”

Constance couldn’t make head nor tail of this sentence. So, she decided to ignore it. She reached back into the closet and pulled out three gowns she could not choose between. One was an ivory-colored gown with embroidery of leaves along the hem, the second was a pale blue color, almost the color of the sky, and the last was a bold green, not dissimilar to the one Viola had worn the night before.

“Which one?” she asked as she laid the three dresses out on the bed for Viola to see. “I have to say, I liked your dress last night.”

“You really did?” Viola looked immensely pleased by this compliment. It prompted Constance to return to Viola’s side and sit

beside her on the ottoman, taking her sister's hand in her own.

"I did. It was a joy to see you in something so . . . bright!" she exclaimed happily. "It made me very happy."

Viola nodded, yet no words came, leaving Constance to stand up again and return her attention to the gowns.

"So, which one do you think I should go for?" She gestured to the gowns.

"Constance, before we discuss that." Viola was on her feet, moving to her side.

"Yes?" Constance asked, her focus much more on the skirt of the cream gown. It was a fine one, but if she was going on a picnic then her skirt could get grass stains and they would be much more noticeable than on the green gown.

"May I talk to you about something?" Viola asked.

“Yes, of course.” Yet Constance’s thoughts were still not on Viola. She pushed the cream gown further back and looked at the other two, thinking at least one with more color would be able to hide the grass stains a little better.

“Constance, you’re not paying attention to me,” Viola pleaded.

“Hmm?” Constance looked up at her. Seeing there was pain in her sister’s face, Constance realized what she was doing. “I’m so sorry. You have my undivided attention.” She turned and focused on her sister completely. “What would you like to talk about?”

Viola looked nervous now. She fiddled with her hands before looping them behind her back.

“I just . . .” She swallowed, before lifting her eyes to meet Constance’s again. “I just want you to be careful.”

“Careful?” Constance’s mind was working quickly. Even without Viola having to say anymore, she quickly cottoned on to what Viola must have been saying. “You still have reservations about Thomas,

don't you?" she asked, waiting to see her sister's reaction.

"It is not that, it is just—"

Yet Constance would not allow Viola to finish.

"It is. I can see it in your face." Constance folded her arms, more than a little irked that Viola had issued this warning so many times now. "Viola, you are a good sister for looking out for me and trying to warn me against any dangers, but I trust Thomas, completely."

"I don't know." Viola shrugged. "I guess I'm just trying to say be careful of who you do trust."

"Thomas Bennett is the man I trust more than any other!" she cried, so strongly that she noticed Viola stumbling backward. She bent her head, and her loose hair completely curtained her face and, as usual, her scar.

Constance was surprised by her own vehemence on the matter. It brought something starkly into contrast for her. She was not just

attached to Thomas, nor did she just like him . . . she loved him.

“I love him.” The words fell from her mouth so quickly that Viola looked up, her eyes growing wide.

“Even though he was a man of such ill reputation before he met you?” Viola asked, frowning slightly.

“Yes, because people change.” Constance needed her sister to understand. “Listen, Viola.” She stepped forward and took Viola’s hands in her own, bringing them up so they were clasped between the sisters. “I love him.” She smiled with the words. “Beyond what I thought was possible. I always want to be near him, his conversation I prefer to anybody else’s, and there is no one who can come near him in merit.”

“You’re quite smitten, aren’t you?” Viola asked, a tone of sadness in her voice.

“Completely,” Constance admitted. It was hopeless, she knew it. In a way, it was inevitable. From the first moment she met Thomas

Bennett, he had gone out of his way to please her, and since then, she knew he'd achieved his goal. As quickly as he made her smile, she wanted to return the favor. If she could spend every day in his company, she knew she would be incredibly happy indeed. "I'm so . . . enthralled by him that I now know no other suitor could make me happy."

"No other?" Viola asked.

"None!"

"Good." Viola smiled.

This simple word stunned Constance. She frowned for a moment, bemused by the change in Viola. She had gone from expressing concern, warning her of men that couldn't be trusted, to seemingly being pleased about it.

"Then, this is all settled?" Constance asked, unsure what to say now. She wanted to think of Thomas and their picnic today; she did not have time to try and unravel Viola's strange behavior.

“Yes.” Viola nodded again. Constance clasped her hands a little tighter.

“Thank you so much for looking out for my well-being.” Constance smiled and squeezed her sister’s hands one last time before releasing them. “But my heart is safe. I am safe. You should concentrate on your own match, rather than mine.”

“My match?” Viola queried.

“Well, I hardly think well of the gentleman.” Constance realized it was time to swallow her pride and support her sister too. “But if you think highly of him, I’m willing to give him a second chance.”

“Who?” Viola asked, apparently completely bemused.

“The Marquess of Devonshire,” Constance said as though the fact was obvious. “Though his transfer of affections from me to you was a little sudden, it is plain to see he has an interest in you.” To Constance’s surprise, Viola looked saddened again. She turned away

and focused on the dresses in front of her.

“You think so?” Viola asked.

“Oh yes.” Constance laughed. “You were the only woman he danced with last night, and those lilies he brought the other day could not be missed,” she said, watching as Viola shifted all the more. “So, I apologize for saying I didn’t like him before. If you think he is a good man, then I am ready to give him the benefit of the doubt.”

“Constance, you’ve got it wrong—”

Constance didn’t hear Viola. She was aware of the words, yet somehow, they didn’t even go in, for her eyes had landed on the clock.

“Oh my goodness, look at the time!” She gestured to the clock. “I’m sorry, Viola, but I really must start getting ready.” She hurried across the room and rang the bell for her maid. “There is not much time left until Thomas arrives. Any last thoughts on the gown?” Constance asked, gesturing down.

“The blue one,” Viola offered with another sad smile. “It suits you very well indeed.”

Constance was baffled once more as Viola reached forward and wrapped her arms around her. For a minute, Constance was surprised, her arms hung loose, but then she brought them up and hugged her sister just as tightly.

“Viola, is something wrong?” Constance asked.

“Now is not the time,” Viola said, her voice extremely quiet in Constance’s ear.

What did that mean?

Constance did not have time to ask as her maid appeared and Viola left the room. She just looked at the retreating figure of her sister before the door closed behind her.

She would ask Viola later what that strange meeting was about. She had to, but for now, she could only think of Thomas. Just his

name brought another smile back to her cheeks, and she turned to the blue gown Viola had suggested.

“Yes, this is the one.”

Chapter 22

Thomas

Thomas' head was pounding. It was so bad he was struggling to roll over in the bed. As he did so, he rolled too far. In his hungover state, he had gotten confused as to where the edge of the bed was and he fell off, landing painfully against the hard wooden floor. He cried out at the sudden impact and nursed his head that was sore all the more now.

After the ball had finished, Thomas had gone back to Antony's house, where they had played whist and drank for most of the night before eventually retiring in the early hours of the morning. It had been a long and fun night, celebrating what Thomas hoped would be one of the last few weeks of his bachelorhood.

He sat straight, struggling with the movement as he recalled the night before. He wasn't certain when it had happened, perhaps sometime when he had been dancing with Miss Constance, but last night his mind had been made up. Her confidence and her conversation were things he didn't want to live without. He had set his mind on her and no one else would do. Once she had met his

parents today for the picnic, he was going to visit Mr. Henderson and ask for formal permission to officially court his daughter.

The picnic!

Thomas scrambled to his feet. The move was so sudden that he careered to the side and nearly fell on the bed. He clutched his head again with one hand as he looked at a small timepiece that was kept on the bedside table in the guest room. He still had time, but not a lot of it.

He stood straight and rang the bell for a valet. The whole time the valet helped him dress, Thomas had to squint at the bright sunlight coming through the thin white curtains. He was struggling to see how he would manage to make it through a picnic in such strong sunlight when he was suffering such a headache.

A few minutes later, he descended the stairs, having to clutch the banister tightly as he went down. In the dining room, he found Antony, already up and sat at the head of the table with a cup of coffee in one hand and a paper in the other.

For a moment, Thomas just stood in the doorway, clutching to the doorframe as he watched his friend.

“How do you do it?” Thomas could see his words made Antony jump, who looked up from the paper, completely startled.

“Do what?” Antony asked, smiling as he took in Thomas’ state.

“One would think you hadn’t had a sip to drink last night. I could have sworn you were as drunk as I was,” Thomas complained and stumbled through the room. He took the chair beside Antony, wincing as he plopped down.

Today was going to be much more difficult than he had anticipated if he could not get past this pain. Beside him, Antony chuckled and put down the paper.

“You never have been able to handle your drink.” Antony was still laughing as Thomas looked at his friend with more than a little resentment.

Yes, they were close friends, but that did not mean that Thomas didn't feel the twinge of jealousy every now and then. Now, it was especially strong, sitting in Antony's fine house and looking at the man who seemed impervious to the consequences of alcohol.

"Even at Eton you never seemed to have a hangover. In fact . . ." Thomas paused, watching his friend closely. "I don't think I've ever seen you with a hangover. How is that possible? You were slurring your words last night!"

"Was I?" Antony asked and rubbed his eyes. "I can't remember that, so it must have been a good night. There is a trick, you know? Not that I have ever seemed to suffer headaches as bad as you anyway." He laughed and gestured to one of the servers. "Please bring Mr. Bennett a glass of raw egg with crushed garlic in it."

"Of course, my lord." The server nodded and hurried off, leaving Thomas to screw up his nose.

"Please tell me I'm not going to drink that," Thomas begged as

Antony rolled his eyes at him.

“What else would I want you to do with it?” Antony asked, as though the answer were a plain one. “You’re not to tip it up into the nearest house plant and pretend to have drunk it either.”

“How would you know if I did?” Thomas asked, grimacing already at the idea of his beverage.

“Because at the moment, none of the plants in this house stink of garlic,” Antony pointed out.

Thomas tipped back his head to laugh then clutched it again. So far, the pain wasn’t getting any better.

“You’ll feel better after you drink it,” Antony said calmly.

“It sounds as if it may make me throw up.” Thomas shuddered at the idea. A few minutes passed in silence before the server returned and presented a glass to Thomas. He just stared at it, refusing to lift a hand to drink it.

“It’s not alive, man, drink it!” Antony urged at his side.

“Sometimes, I wonder why I like you at all,” Thomas muttered then tossed back the whole concoction, downing it in one go. He was aware of Antony laughing at his side, until he finished it off. He had to cover his mouth for a minute, urging the mixture to stay down. “How on earth does that make you feel better?”

“Give it half an hour,” Antony assured, “and you will see. Now, you’re off for your picnic today?”

“I am.” Thomas nodded, sitting back in his chair again.

“And do you still intend to do what you declared last night?” Antony asked, just as Thomas frowned. There were parts of the night that were hazy for him too.

“What did I say?” he asked carefully.

“That you intend to officially court Miss Constance after today,”

Antony explained, sipping from his coffee cup.

“Yes, I intend to.” Thomas smiled, sitting straighter in his chair. “Last night made up my mind; it convinced me of it. I’m quite certain there is no other woman out there who could make me smile the way Miss Constance does.”

“Hmm,” Antony said, keeping his eyes on his coffee cup.

“Something wrong?” Thomas asked, sensing there was more to that sound then just a note of agreement.

“Nothing, just thinking about her sister,” Antony said, replacing the cup on his saucer.

Thomas felt he had to say something. He’d seen Antony tearing himself into bits because of Miss Viola. If she had no intention of accepting Antony’s attentions, then Thomas wanted to save his friend from the heartbreak she could cause.

“Antony.” Thomas leaned his elbows on the table, being careful

as he caught his friend's gaze. "May I speak out of turn?"

"You always do. Please, continue," Antony urged with a wave of his hand.

"About Miss Viola." Thomas shifted in his seat, a little fearful once he saw Antony's gaze turn dark. "If Miss Viola is attached to Devonshire, perhaps it is time to back off a little."

"Back off?" Antony looked startled by the idea. "That man doesn't deserve someone like Miss Viola," he said with a firm shake of the head.

"Someone like her?" Thomas repeated with a little confusion. "She seems very quiet and sullen to me, why are you enamored with her so much?"

"Thomas." Antony's glare was now so dark that Thomas sat back in his seat, regretting his words a little. "You do realize how rude that was?"

“I did not mean to be rude.” Thomas pinched the bridge of his nose. “You’re my friend, Antony. What kind of friend would I be if I did not try to save you from the heartbreak Miss Viola could cause you?”

There was a beat of silence between them. It stretched as Thomas held his breath, fearful he should have not said anything after all.

“Thank you, Thomas,” Antony broke the silence after a minute. “I’m thankful for the warning, but after last night, I’m not giving up yet.”

“Why not?” Thomas asked, curious as to the answer.

“Because she said quite simply that Devonshire was not the man she loved.” At Antony’s words, Thomas blanched in surprise.

What other man does Miss Viola know?

“In fact, when I pushed the matter of the man she loved, she said she did not wish to speak about him anymore. In fact, she asked me

more about my travels." Antony was speaking with a small smile now. "She accepted a second dance. Why would she do all that?"

"Ah." Thomas smiled and folded his arms. "You think that she is having second thoughts about this love of hers? And you're sure it's not wishful thinking?"

"I have hope enough not to give up yet." Antony shrugged. "When I told her that I wasn't giving up, she could have said then and there that I should, but she did not. Believe me, Thomas, she clung as tightly to me while we were dancing as I clung to her."

These simple words brought Thomas a smile. He picked up the glass of egg and garlic that just had dregs on the bottom and held it up to Antony, as though he were toasting him.

"Then let us hope whoever she did love before will not be sorry to have lost her love when you have it," Thomas said with a smile.

"I hope so too." Antony chinked his coffee cup with Thomas' glass, then Thomas drank the dregs, pulling an awful face as he

lowered the glass again.

“You’re a mad man if you drink that every time when you have a hangover,” Thomas said, shaking his head.

“Not every time. As I said, I don’t get them the way you do.” Antony sipped his coffee.

“I’m more jealous than I can say,” Thomas admitted, hanging his head on the table for a minute as Antony laughed. The pain was just starting to ease.

Thomas was still cursing Antony’s name as he stepped up to the Henderson house. The man had been right. Less than two hours later and Thomas felt like a new man. All traces of his hangover had gone, including the pounding headache and the slightly sick feeling.

He knocked on the door, eager to see Miss Constance again and to begin their day.

When the door opened, the butler showed him into the entrance

hall. Before Thomas had even had a chance to say that he was there to see Miss Constance, she appeared.

Thomas felt his lips stop moving as he looked up the stairs that led into the entrance hall. Constance was walking down the steps, breathtakingly beautiful.

Her auburn hair was curled up behind her head, cascading with a few loose curls at the back of her neck. Her complexion was light, as though she could barely contain her excitement, just like him. She was wearing a fine pastel blue dress, fitted with short sleeves and a deep neckline that complimented her figure perfectly.

Thomas' mouth felt a little dry, and as he swallowed, he readjusted his cravat, trying to appear smart and composed for her arrival, despite the fact he was anything but. He was captivated. As she reached the bottom step, she looked up at him, her hazel eyes finding his across the entrance hall.

As she walked toward him, he found his own feet crossing the distance to her. He nearly reached for her hand straight away; the

only thing that stopped him was the sound of the butler behind him, reminding him of propriety.

He stopped just short of Constance and bowed deeply to her, holding her gaze the whole time. She blushed and curtsied, her eyes staying with his. As they both stood straight again, Thomas reached for her hand, unable to stay away.

“Miss Constance.” He brought her hand up to his lips and kissed the back, watching as her lips parted and formed a small ‘o’. “How are you today?”

“A little tired,” she said. “I have barely slept, in truth. I have been thinking much about today.”

“As I have,” he assured her, lowering her hand back down but not yet wanting to release it. “The carriage is all prepared to take us to my father’s seat in the countryside. It seems we have perfect weather for the picnic too.”

“Quite so.” Constance smiled up at him, clearly aware that he

hadn't yet released her hand. "It seems God is smiling down on our day out."

"So he is." Thomas knew he was not the only one smiling. His cheeks would probably ache at the end of the day.

"I must admit," she said as he took her hand and looped it around his arm, steering her ready to walk out again, "I am a little nervous of meeting your parents."

"Nervous of them? Oh no," he said. "There is no need to be nervous. They are like anyone else's parents."

"I hope not," Constance whispered. "As much as I love my mother, I hope not all mothers are like her." It was a great confidence indeed to share, and Thomas laughed warmly at the idea.

"She has a good heart, I am sure," Thomas said.

"She does, it is just her ways, her whims, if you will," Miss Constance said, still smiling. "What is your mother like?"

“She is . . .” Thomas paused, thinking of the right words with care. “Eager. For everything in life. She is already predisposed to like you from everything I’ve told her about you. Just recently, my mother gushed about you in her letter for about . . . three pages I think.”

“But she hasn’t met me yet!” Constance shook her head at the idea.

“Just so. So you can be certain you have no reason to be nervous,” Thomas assured, patting her hand that was holding onto his arm.

“Ah, you have arrived, Mr. Bennett,” a man’s deep voice came across the entrance hall. Thomas turned the two of them to see Mr. and Mrs. Henderson walking out of the doorway from a nearby room.

“Good day, Mr. Henderson.” Thomas bowed to him. “And to you, Mrs. Henderson.” Miss Viola was nowhere to be seen.

“Oh, I am so excited for you.” Mrs. Henderson bustled forward

with some gloves in her hands that she passed to Constance.

“How far away is the estate?” Mr. Henderson crossed the distance toward him, clearly ignoring the way his wife was now fussing over their daughter.

“A two-hour journey,” Thomas explained, watching Constance with Mrs. Henderson. Just by looking at them, it brought into perspective what Constance had said a few minutes before about her mother. She would not stop fussing or arranging her daughter’s hair until it was what she deemed to be perfect.

“Well, I wish you a pleasant journey.” Mr. Henderson extended his hand to Thomas and he took it gladly.

“Thank you.” Thomas nodded, pleased that, with the smile Mr. Henderson was offering him, he was quite likely to secure the man’s permission to court Constance when he asked.

“Come, Jane,” Mr. Henderson said, tugging on his wife’s hand so that she would let go of Constance. “You must let our daughter go so

she won't be late for the picnic." Mrs. Henderson adjusted one last lock of hair before stepping back.

"I hope you have a lovely day, my dear," she said quickly to Constance. "The house will be quite empty without you."

"I'm just going for the day, Mother," Constance said. "I shall see you later."

"Oh, let's go out and wave them off, Archibald!" Jane called as Thomas led Constance out, with her parents following.

If he had his way, he would soon be leading Constance out of the house for much longer than just a day. He looked back as they reached the door, watching Mr. and Mrs. Henderson as they followed.

It was the sight behind the couple that had Thomas intrigued, though.

Miss Viola was standing at the top of the stairs, her face a perfect picture of sadness. She seemed to be watching the two of them for a

minute, before she turned away and walked across the landing.

Thomas frowned for a minute as he too looked away and led Constance down the steps and toward the carriage that awaited them. For the life of him, he could not understand why Antony was so besotted with Miss Viola. She really did seem very sullen and sad with life in general. Very different from her sister.

At this thought, Thomas turned his eyes back to Constance and his face lit up into a smile.

After all, what was there to be sad about when Constance was on his arm?

Chapter 23

Constance

"Oh, Constance." Jane was fussing again. Constance had tried to extricate herself more than once, but it did little good.

Thomas had double-checked all the preparations, but the carriage was very ready now, waiting on her for them to part.

Constance looked over her mother's shoulder as she hugged her, watching as Thomas hovered by the open door of the carriage, evidently with some humor in his face at the display.

"I'm so proud of you," Jane murmured in Constance's ear, before pulling back. "I am sure Mr. Bennett's parents will love you. How could they not?"

"Thank you, Mother." Constance tried to pull her hand free of her mother's grasp. "I really must go now, or I will miss the picnic."

As if in answer to her plea, her father stepped forward. He took her in an embrace too, forcing Jane to drop her hand.

“I am sorry I had held you back before, darling,” he whispered in her ear. Constance was startled by these words. She hadn’t even considered it was her father holding her back. She had just thought it was Archibald trying to do the right thing by encouraging Viola to marry first. “I am very proud of you.” He leaned back, but Constance wasn’t so certain she liked this new resolution.

Is he . . . giving up hope on Viola marrying at all? Has he condemned her to spinsterhood already? Just because I am about to court Thomas?

Constance could not smile; the thought upset her too much.

Archibald took her hand and led her to Thomas. She returned his smile before stepping into the carriage. They waited a moment for her maid to come outside. Lily was to be her chaperone for the day, and once she was helped into the carriage too, sitting opposite Constance, Thomas stepped in, closing the carriage door behind him.

It was the first time Constance had been in a carriage with him, and she was suddenly very aware of how close their bodies were. He

must have realized the same thing as they shared a smile, excitement bubbling beneath before they both looked back out of the carriage window.

Jane was waving animatedly, while Archibald waved with much more reserve. Then, the carriage lurched forward, and they were off.

They were barely a few yards down the street when Thomas laughed and turned in his seat to look at Constance.

“Well, for a brief moment back there, I thought your mother wasn’t going to let go of you at all.” He was still chuckling as she shook her head and covered her mouth for a minute.

“It is what she is like,” Constance said, trying not to sound resentful of her mother. “I love her. I do, but she can be a little much at times.”

“My mother is quite different from her, to answer your question from earlier,” Thomas elaborated as he sat back in the carriage seat. Constance sat back too, thinking how easily she could become

accustomed to the sensation of sitting beside him.

“I’m very nervous,” she said after a minute, wringing her hands together. “I just want everything to go well.”

“Everything will be perfect.” Thomas shook his head and took her hand.

Constance was startled by it, looking between their clasped hands and Lily across the carriage, but Lily only betrayed a small smile before turning her gaze out of the window. Clearly, she was attempting to give them a little privacy.

They travelled for a little while in peace. They talked every now and then of the plans for their day. Thomas explained that his parents had arranged for their picnic to not only be held in the grand estate of the house, but amongst the strawberry fields, for which the grounds were so well known.

However, Constance soon slipped back into her panic, uncertain of what was to come.

“What is your father like?” she asked, as Thomas held tightly to her hand, their fingers intertwined perfectly. “We have discussed your mother, but not your father.”

“I think you’ll find him very amusing.” He smiled as he said the words. “He is a man always looking for the next joke, so pray, do not take him too seriously if he is to make a jest at your expense. It is just his way.”

“Very well.” Constance nodded, feeling a little more prepared now.

“He is just as eager to meet you as my mother is, though I admit, he doesn’t gush about you in his letters the way she does.” Thomas laughed at this idea.

“Good, one can grow a little tired of gushing,” Constance said quietly, hoping that Lily wouldn’t hear them. The maid seemed to be fixing her attention more and more on what was beyond the window, trying to ignore the conversation.

“You speak of your own mother now?” Thomas said, twisting on the bench in the carriage so that he faced her a little more. “What is it that bothers you, Miss Constance, about her? There is something there that you have not yet spoken of?”

“There is.” She sighed, looking up at his blue eyes. She loved him, she knew she did. Of all people in the world, surely, he was the one she could trust with all her secrets. “May I discuss a secret with you, Mr. Bennett?”

“Please do.” He squeezed her hand, reassuring her.

“It cannot have escaped your notice each time you have met my mother that she fusses over me, gushing to use your term. She is an extremely attentive and kind mother to me,” Constance rushed to explain.

“Yes, I have seen it,” Thomas admitted. “Most mothers are the same. Why does this trouble you?”

“Because of Viola.” The moment the words left her mouth, she could see they startled him. Enough that his eyebrows shot up.

“It seems your sister is a favorite topic of conversation today,” he mused with a small smile.

“What do you mean?” Constance asked, frowning.

“Antony,” he explained with a wave of his hand. “I stayed at his house last night, and he was keen to talk of her this morning.” Constance smiled at knowing the Marquess of Salisbury still had an attachment to Viola. She could only hope that perhaps her sister would look away from the Marquess of Devonshire in time and turn to Lord Salisbury instead. “Anyway, continue.” He waved another hand toward her.

“My mother does not mean anything by it. At least, that’s what I tell myself.” Constance swallowed, feeling a sudden lump in her throat. “But, she ignores my sister. Have you not seen it yourself?”

Thomas sat back in the seat, his face pensive.

“She disregards her, repeatedly,” Constance went on. Now she had opened up on this secret of her innermost feelings, she was determined to tell him all. “I worry for Viola, more than I can say. I love her and have always tried to show her that, but is that enough when our mother can be so . . . neglectful?”

Thomas suddenly leaned forward again, clasping her hand all the more.

“Constance, you have a good heart, truly you do,” he said. She was aware of how close they were now. She could feel the heat of his body. “But you must know that your sister’s happiness is not your responsibility. Neither is it your mother’s.”

“No, I know that,” Constance said with a nod, knowing deep down that perhaps she had felt exactly this for too long. “Yet my mother is *dampening* her happiness. Of that I am certain.”

“That is not good.” Mr. Bennett shook his head in thought. “You know, the more I hear of your sister from you and Antony, the more I

think I have misunderstood her."

"Forgive me for saying this, Thomas, but that hardly surprises me." Constance had to say the words. "Many people judge my sister on their first impressions upon meeting her."

"Then you will forgive me for making snap judgments too, I hope?" Thomas looked very hopeful indeed.

"Of course, I do." Constance smiled and placed a hand over their clasped hands, so that she was holding his palm between her two. "I guess . . . I'm not really sure why I'm telling you this; just to get it off my chest I suppose."

"I hope you will always tell me things like this," he murmured softly. "I like to know what's in your heart, Constance. Truly I do. And I cannot tell you how happy it makes me that you have chosen me to be your confidante."

Constance was mesmerized as he lifted her hand to his lips and kissed the back again. She could feel the heat of his kiss even through

the gloves. As he lowered their hands back down, she held his gaze, feeling breathless.

"I am curious, what made you wish to discuss this now?" he pushed the matter further.

"My parents' behavior just now." Constance gestured out of the window, as though she could point back to the house, even though they were now some distance away. "My mother clearly does not hold much hope to the idea of my sister ever being married, and my father just said something that makes me think he's giving up hope too. For all my mother's strange ways, I do not want our father to give up on her too."

"I am sure he hasn't." Thomas shook his head, suddenly animated. "Besides which, I know of one man who very much wishes to marry her."

"You do not mean . . . the Marquess of Salisbury?" Constance asked, a little surprised. "But Viola said . . ."

“Whatever your sister has said in the past, Constance, she has given him enough reason to hope for it,” Thomas said carefully.

“Then I hope it is true. I really do.” Constance felt content for the first time since hearing her father’s comment.

She smiled at Thomas just as there was a strange sound up ahead.

“What was that?” she asked.

“I don’t know.” His gaze flicked forward.

There was an almighty shout beyond the windows, thunderous and roaring, as though the coach driver were calling out to someone.

The carriage tipped and thudded further down, lower to the ground. Constance released Thomas’ hand, both of her hands going to grasp the seat beneath her.

What is happening?

That's when she heard Lily scream, and the carriage began to tip further.

She was suddenly not in the carriage, but in a memory. In that memory, the carriage was tipping again, yet she was much younger. The only thing that had stopped her from colliding with the carriage floor, from being injured against the splintered wood was Viola grabbing hold of her. For a brief moment, it was as though Constance was reliving it. She could feel the way Viola's arms had come up around her. She could see how Viola had twisted their bodies, determined to protect Constance from any harm.

Now, it was happening again, but Viola wasn't there to protect her.

Constance was back in the moment, watching in horror as the carriage seemed to be screeching along the ground, with the horses still pulling, evidently missing at least one, if not two wheels.

There was a holler for the horses to stop and they must have

turned a corner because the carriage began to tip sideways completely, rolling over.

Lily screamed again. Constance tried to scream too, but the sound died in her throat.

As she rolled over, about to collide against the side of the carriage, it was not Viola's arms that came up to keep her safe, but Thomas'.

He rolled the two of them over, until he was on his back, taking the brunt of the force as the carriage skidded across the ground. Constance clung to him, praying with all her might that the carriage would stop moving soon.

Chapter 24

Viola

It had been a strange night for Viola, fitful and with lots of waking dreams and rolling over. In the end, she had woken with the sun and realized some harsh things about her life.

Mr. Bennett would never be interested in her, yet perhaps that was not the bad thing she had once thought. He was not as interesting company as the Marquess of Salisbury for starters; therefore, why did she still cling to Mr. Bennett?

She abandoned sleep completely when she realized that was just the mistake she had made. She had clung to the *idea* of Mr. Bennett. That was all. Not the real man. The truth was that she did not know the real him, not at all.

She had allowed herself to become fixated on an idea she had once upon a time, because she had thought that it was her turn to have some attention instead of Constance. She had been heartbroken to find that the one man that she had *thought* was perfect for her infinitely preferred Constance to her.

Viola thought of all her conversations with the Marquess of Devonshire and how he had manipulated her. For there really was no other word for it at the end of the day. He had persuaded her that all would be well, that somehow what they were doing was in Constance's best interests, that it was for her happiness as well as for their own.

But it wasn't. Was it?

Viola had gone to Constance that morning, her mind a blur of different emotions. Hearing how little Mr. Bennett was like the Marquess of Salisbury had firmed up some of that blur.

Why did I ever prefer Mr. Bennett to the Marquess of Salisbury?

It was only when looking at the gowns on Constance's bed that she had realized why. It was because she had been jealous of Constance. In truth, it had had little to do with Mr. Bennett. It was all about Constance, and when she realized how jealous she had allowed herself to become of her sister, how she had let that monster of envy

twist her and actually impact her actions, she was disgusted with herself.

She'd had that cryptic conversation with Constance in the hope that she could warn her sister to be wary of the Marquess of Devonshire. For Viola knew that he would not yet abandon his plan. As Viola had never said the Marquess' name, merely that Constance should be careful who she trusted, Constance had misunderstood her and thought she was warning her against Mr. Bennett again. Viola had been pleased to see Constance talk so passionately in the defense of Mr. Bennett. The declaration that Constance loved the gentleman showed Viola all she needed to know.

Constance and Mr. Bennett belong together, and I should never have attempted to destroy that.

It had been her jealousy at work. Perhaps all she wanted was someone to fuss over her the way Jane did with Constance. And in the blindness of that envy, Viola had missed the one man who was willing to give her that.

Now, a little time after Constance had left for her picnic, Viola sat in the drawing room, painting another picture. Only, this one wasn't her traditional landscapes. It was a portrait. She was painting the face of Constance, just as her mother always wanted her to do. Yet with every line of Constance's face she painted, her thoughts were on someone else entirely: the Marquess of Salisbury.

She cared for him, deeply. Even with her constantly looking elsewhere, the man had worked his way under her skin. She loved his conversation, his company, his passions, and his pursuits. He was the most interesting man she had ever met, and she knew beyond doubt that she was strongly attached to him.

She sighed and took a pause in her painting, looking up at the ceiling and blinking away the threat of tears as she thought of him.

"I have hurt my happiness, along with his, by what I have done," she murmured to herself under her breath before looking back at the painting. "That ends now." She smiled as she looked at the painting and began to color her sister's eyes.

I love you, Constance. All I want is your happiness, and your forgiveness for me being such a fool.

She intended to tell Constance when she returned that night. She would apologize and pour her heart out. She would tell her sister what she had done and the reasons why. She had to hope Constance would understand the jealousy that had overtaken her. She was free of it now. At least there was that.

There was a knock on the door, and Viola looked up in surprise. Jane had left to have lunch with some friends and her father was out, attending some business.

"Enter," she called, and the butler opened the door.

"The Marquess of Devonshire is here to see you, Miss Viola." At his words, her heart sank. If only it had been the Marquess of Salisbury instead.

"Oh." She sighed. "Best leave the door open so you can chaperone."

He nodded and opened the door wider, allowing the Marquess of Devonshire to step in.

She moved away from her painting, not wanting the Marquess to see it. It suddenly felt wrong to her, to let this man so close to the painting she was doing out of love for Constance.

“Miss Viola.” He barely bowed to her before crossing the distance between them. “I come to convey good news.”

“Good news? What is that?” she asked, frowning. She had hoped to jump in before he had the chance to speak and say that she would no longer have any part of his game, yet he had not given her the chance.

“All of our problems will be over this morning.” He held out his arms wide as though he expected an applause for it.

These words left Viola cold. She frowned all the more, staring at him. He seemed interminably pleased with himself.

“What have you done?” She had never known her own voice take on a note of such coldness. He seemed surprised by it too before he pushed on, lowering his voice, clearly in the hope that the butler outside wouldn’t hear him.

“My footman was paid handsomely to tamper with Mr. Bennett’s carriage this morning,” he said with such glee that Viola stumbled away. She reached for her stomach, feeling abruptly nauseous as the bile rose up in her throat.

“Tell me you are not being serious,” Viola pleaded with him, holding the man’s gaze, but he just continued to smile.

“They will not be getting far on their journey. Their carriage should be having an accident shortly,” He turned to the mantelpiece where there was a clock. “Oh, very shortly. Imagine that. No courtship would ever be permitted between Mr. Bennett and Miss Constance after he allowed her to be in a carriage accident.”

Viola felt as though she were looking at the Marquess for the first

time. He was not a man. He was not even a monster. He was a demon borrowing a human form.

"What have you done!?" Her voice screeched so loudly that he backed away, though he still smiled.

"I have solved all our problems, Miss Viola. Aren't you pleased?"

"Pleased!? You have submitted my sister to a carriage accident. To another . . ." She faltered, her hand going to her cheek where the scar resided. She remembered so vividly how she had thrown her body against Constance's on the day of their carriage accident, desperate to save her little sister. What if this time Constance could not be saved? "You could harm Constance!"

"That won't happen, I am sure." The Marquess shrugged, clearly deluded and convinced he had everything worked out.

"You are a mad man." Viola was not sure where she found her voice, but it came out very loud indeed. The Marquess took another step back. He lifted his chin high and sneered at her, looking down his

nose with the same amount of disgust she was looking at him with.

"I have solved our problem." He gestured to himself, proudly.

"No, you haven't." She shook her head. "You were so jealous of Mr. Bennett earning my sister's affection that you were willing to see him and Constance harmed as some sort of . . . twisted vendetta!"

"Talk of jealousy, Miss Viola, but aren't you just the same?" He leered toward her, still with that sneer. "You cared for the man your sister wished to court?"

"I am nothing like you," she said, her voice so strong that the Marquess' jaw twitched. "I cared for an idea of a person. Not the real man. And I'm not so mad as to actually try to endanger someone's life out of pure idiocy because of my jealousy. Leave." She gestured to the door, yet he went nowhere. "Get out, now! If I ever set eyes on you again, then I will tell everyone what you did today. I have no wish to see you again."

"The feeling is mutual," he snapped and spun round on his heel,

leaving as quickly as he had arrived.

Viola reared backward, her hands going to clutch her hair as she panicked, pacing back and forth for a minute. She had to stop this, before it was too late. Who knew how badly the footman had damaged Mr. Bennett's carriage? Perhaps it wasn't so bad? Or maybe it was worse than she thought?

Either way, she had to do something. She had to get someone to help Constance and Mr. Bennett, before any harm could come to them.

She ran to the door of the drawing room, knowing exactly who she should go to see. The only man she ever trusted.

The Marquess of Salisbury.

The carriage ride was far too long for Viola's liking. She prayed the whole way that Antony would be home, but with every clack of the wheels against the cobbles beneath them, she feared what the answer would be. She also feared that they would not get to Constance and Mr. Bennett in time.

When the carriage came to a halt, Viola didn't wait for the footman to open the door. She didn't care for propriety or anything. She only cared about Constance and the danger her sister was in.

She pushed open the door and leapt down, nearly knocking the footman off his feet as she raced across the cobbles and up to Antony's house. She knocked loudly, never relenting or letting up.

When the door opened, a butler on the other side seemed somewhat startled by her appearance, clearly shocked that a young lady would knock so rudely on the door.

"I must speak to the Marquess," she said breathlessly. "It's an emergency."

"Very well," he said, far too calmly. "May I take a na—"

"Viola! Tell him it's Viola, please!" She ushered him back inside. He beckoned her to follow, and she did so in what she considered was probably a very unladylike manner. She had her skirt gathered around

her knees, clutched in her hands, allowing her to move much more easily.

"Please wait here," the butler said, frustrating her all the more as they appeared by a study door.

What? No!

She couldn't wait. Not for anything. He knocked and opened the door just a fraction.

"Excuse me, my lord—" he began, just as Viola lost patience entirely. She pushed on the door beside the butler and burst in. The butler stumbled on his feet, his mouth agape in complete surprise. "My lady!"

"I'm sorry, but this is an emergency." She hoped the butler would forgive her. She turned to look at Antony. He was standing up from his place at the desk, his shirt sleeves rolled up to his elbows. Any other time, she would have marveled at the tanned skin exposed and the glimpse of muscle there, but not now.

“Miss Viola—”

“Not now.” She shook her head and stepped toward him. “I must speak to you. To say it is urgent is an understatement of the gravity of this moment.”

“Give us a moment.” He nodded to the butler. “Leave the door open.” The door had to be left open, of course, otherwise it would be scandalous for them to be alone.

The butler followed his orders, stepping out and leaving the door open. Viola was still struggling to catch her breath as Antony circled the desk, walking toward her, his face a perfect picture of worry.

“Miss Viola—”

“Just Viola,” she pleaded. “Just Viola” She watched as his concerned face flickered into a smile. It was to be lost in the next moment with her words. “Constance and Mr. Bennett are in danger.”

Antony

"I don't understand." Antony found himself reaching for Viola. She was trembling. Just as he reached for her, she did for him. Their hands met in the middle. He would have been thrilled at her touch if it wasn't for the fact her hands were trembling. "What has happened?" he asked quickly, clasping to her hands tightly to support her.

"The Marquess of Devonshire." She shook her head. "I don't have time to explain why now, but he has sabotaged their carriage. He paid a footman to do it. Antony," she said his first name. No title, but his first name! His heart leapt in hope, but it was overtaken by fear. "Their carriage . . . they'll be hurt!"

"Right." He nodded, determined to step into action. He continued to hold onto one of Viola's hands and drew her out of the study. "My horse!" he called as he stepped out, with Viola following behind. Her fingers were grasping his. The butler was outside and nodded, eagerly following them. "At once, there is to be no delay. Understood?"

"Of course, my lord." The butler ran off to see to the matter, just as Antony continued to draw Viola toward the door.

“How will you find them?” Viola asked as they stepped out of the door and onto the street, still holding one another.

“I know what route he will take,” Antony explained, looking back at her as he heard the sounds of the horse being brought round.

“I’m coming with you,” she said quickly.

“What? No!” he said just as fast. “For one thing, I am not putting you in that danger. For another, I’ll be much faster if I go by horse and not carriage.”

“I am not staying here,” she said, pulling on his hand. “This is my sister we are talking about. She is in danger, and it is all my fault!”

Her fault?

These words rang against his ears.

“I’ll want an explanation later.” He turned just as the horse was

brought to him. The stable boy was still at the horse's side, fixing the saddle in place.

"You'll have it," Viola said, still holding onto him. "Just . . . try not to hate me too much when you hear it." These words made him flick his head back to her.

"I won't hate you, Viola. I give you my word on that." He knew it in his heart. She didn't look convinced.

"Then, if I can't come with you, I'll follow you." She looked at the carriage. He couldn't argue with that.

"Very well." He lifted her hand to his lips momentarily. "All will be well. Trust me."

"I do trust you." She smiled through her sadness. "But I do not trust a sabotaged carriage."

He nodded with these words and released her hand. He mounted his horse quickly, urging it into a fast gallop just as he saw her hurry

back into her carriage.

He rode as fast as he could through the streets, overtaking carriages and dodging pedestrians that stepped out into the road. He couldn't let up. Not if he was going to hold his promise.

No harm will come to Thomas and Miss Constance.

Chapter 25

Thomas

Thomas blinked through the dust, struggling to see. He could just make out a figure. It was Lily, the maid. From where their carriage had rolled, she was closer to the door. She was coughing through the dust and climbing out of the door that was facing the sky. As her feet disappeared, Thomas looked down and into his arms.

Constance was there, breathing heavily against his chest. His arms were around her. He was certain he had never held onto anything so tightly in his life.

“It’s over, isn’t it?” Constance whispered, her voice strained. Thomas looked around at the fallen carriage that would not move again.

“It’s over,” he assured her, staring at her.

She coughed, clearing the dust and debris from her lungs, and moved a little. The new position meant she was still in his arms, with his hands around her back, holding her to him, but she was staring

down at him now, their faces level.

“Tell me you are unharmed, please,” she begged him, her face so close to his that he was tempted to kiss her out of pure relief that they were alive.

“My head hurts a little.” He blinked a few times, realizing it. Her eyes widened, and she lifted a hand between them.

“You’re bleeding,” she said, turning her attention to his temple, then she sighed. “It is cut, but I don’t think it is bad.”

“Your turn.” He held tighter to her. “Tell me you are unharmed.”

“I . . .” She seemed to check herself over, looking down at how their bodies were pressed together. “I am fine. A few bruises, but you cushioned my fall.”

“Of course I did.” He tried to shake his head, then kept it still. The sudden movement made the wound on his head hurt. “I always will.”

“I feel as if I am reliving the past.” Constance stared down at him, those hazel eyes narrowed in thought.

“What do you mean?” Thomas asked, still not letting go of his concern for her. He didn’t dare move his hands away from her back just yet. He was too much overcome by the fact she was all right.

“It is like what happened before.” She looked up from him and at the carriage and the debris. “The same dust, the same broken carriage. All that’s different is that Viola broke my fall on that occasion.”

“She did?” Thomas asked, startled by the statement. “Hang on . . . she got her scar because she was protecting you?” He smiled at Constance.

“She did,” Constance agreed. “I seem to be the cause of many scars.” She looked down at the bump on his head. He felt her fingers go to his hair line and pull it back. He sank into that touch. For so long had he dreamed of having Constance’s hands touch him like this, he just never imagined it would happen in this kind of situation. “I

think you'll have a scar from the cut. Just a little one."

"Thank God you are all right." He pulled her down into him again, just resting on his back. He cradled her cheek with one hand, keeping her to him. "I suppose now is as good a time as any to say it, Constance, but I love you." He had to say it now. When would there be a better time?

She looked up then, just a smidge so that their eyes connected. There were tears on her face.

"I love you too," she whispered.

He pulled on her cheek, desperate to kiss her at last.

"Mr. Bennett? Miss Constance?" a voice called from outside the carriage, stopping Thomas before he could have that kiss.

He smiled and rested his forehead against Constance's for a moment.

“Another time,” Constance whispered to him.

“I’ll hold you to that.” He sighed. “Let’s check that everyone else is all right.”

“Are you all right in there?” Lily’s voice disturbed them again.

“Yes,” Constance called back. “We’re coming.”

Together, Thomas and Constance helped each other up. Thomas guided her to the door first and encouraged her to climb out. It was difficult with the carriage on its side, and impossible for either of them to do it with much grace. As they did, Thomas realized just how dazed he was from the bump to the head.

He veered off to the side, caught and held up by Constance and one of the footmen.

“Thomas!” Constance cried as she grasped at him.

“Dizzy.” He caught his breath and stood still again, blinking a

few times. “That is all.” He looked around the mess. “Is everyone all right?”

“Yes,” the footman agreed, gesturing behind him to the coach driver. “Our driver, I think, is the worst injured.” The poor man’s hands looked ripped from having held onto the reins. “We need to get him to a doctor.”

“That we do,” Thomas agreed, suddenly needing to sit down again. He reared backward, half falling through the air.

“Thomas!” Constance cried again, just as she and the footman caught him under his arms and lowered him down.

Thomas tried to take in the carnage around him. The carriage was completely on its side, with two wheels missing and the wood ripped open. Behind them was a trail of fractured wood and splinters. At the side of the road and pressed against one of the townhouses was one of their wheels. Another of their wheels was in the center of the road, buckled into two pieces. Up ahead, the horses had been unharnessed from the broken carriage. One was tied up to a nearby

post, appearing shocked and frozen to the spot. The other was tied up to another post altogether, this one so skittish that it would not set down on four legs, it just kept rearing back onto two.

The footman stood again and wandered about, picking up bits of the carriage, as Lily went to the driver's side and tried to bind up the wounds on his hand with spare cloth.

"Thank God." Thomas sighed as Constance sat down beside him on the ground. He didn't care they were sitting among the broken remnants of the carriage or that they were getting even more dirty. "No one is hurt badly."

"I know." Constance nodded at his side and reached for his hand. He took it tightly in his own, needing that lifeline. He turned to her completely, his eyes examining her.

She was still beautiful, even in her fear. Her hair had fallen out of part of her updo, causing the auburn curls to fall about her shoulders. There were a couple of scratches on her neck and arms, as though she had been struck by a few splinters. Her dress was torn at

the hem too, and it was smeared with dirt from where the carriage had dragged across the cobbled pavement. Yet, she was in one piece. That was all that mattered.

He drew her into his side. He couldn't kiss her out here, not with so many people around, but the situation wouldn't allow him to get through this moment with nothing.

He threaded their joint hands over her head and rested his arm around her waist, pulling her into his side, so that their hips were pressed together. She rested her head on his shoulder. The whole position was intimate, one of true partners.

"If any harm had come to you." He blinked a few times, unsure if it was the dizziness or the temptation to shed the tears he was trying to ward off. "I never would have been able to forgive myself."

"Thomas." She twisted her head off his shoulder to look at him. "It was no one's fault. Carriage accidents happen."

"Yes, but . . ." He didn't like it. Yes, these sorts of accidents were

common, yet for Constance to be in two such accidents in her life? The chances were slim indeed! “I still would have never forgiven myself. I think of it as my responsibility to look after you.”

“Does that mean I get to look after you too?” she asked, smiling up at him and breaking some of the fear that hung over their heads.

“I rather like that idea.” He smiled too. “We get to look after each other.”

“Mr. Bennett!” The footman returned to their side, depositing a lot of the debris he had collected from the ground nearby. Among the rubbish was one of the wheels.

“Yes?” he said, watching as the footman came closer to him.

“I’ve just observed something about our carriage.” The footman knelt before him and Constance.

“Don’t tell me that it’s in pieces,” Thomas jested, needing the joke to lighten the mood. “I can see that myself.” Constance laughed

too.

The footman merely smiled and shook his head.

“No, it is something else.” He reached for the broken wheel and held it up. “I grew up around carriages, Mr. Bennett. My father made them for a living. I know how they’re put together.”

“And?” Thomas prompted him on. There was clearly a point to this story.

“This isn’t right.” The footman grimaced. The pained look was a kind of agony, as though he were afraid of speaking as he glanced at Constance.

“Speak freely with the two of us,” Thomas encouraged. “Please.”

“All right.” The footman nodded and lowered the wheel back down. “I’m quite certain the carriage was tampered with.”

Thomas and Constance instantly sat up straight, their spines so

rigid that they lifted away from their slumped positions.

“You’re absolutely certain?” Thomas pressed the point, taking a part of the broken wheel out of the footman’s hands.

“I am.” He nodded. “The two wheels were unscrewed. So far that it couldn’t have been by accident or wear and tear. There are even marks in the wood where someone has tried to loosen them off. There isn’t a doubt in my mind. This was done on purpose.”

Thomas looked at Constance. She had her hands over her mouth now, in complete shock.

“Who would do such a thing?” As she looked at Thomas, her eyes widened, and she reached into her skirt. Thomas was still so busy thinking of the broken wheel in his hand, that he barely noticed when Constance placed a handkerchief to his forehead, trying to blot some of the blood from his temple.

“I can’t believe it,” Thomas said to himself. “This is just . . . the true definition of malicious. Who would do—” Thomas broke off

suddenly at the sound of hooves.

"Thomas!?" It was Antony's voice.

Thomas swiveled his head round to see Antony riding toward them. He was still down the far end of the road. Thomas had never seen Antony riding quite like that, as though the flames of hell were licking at the horse's hooves.

Antony urged the horse harder when he saw their position.

"Antony?" Thomas was too shocked by his friend's presence to do nothing. He dropped the piece of the wheel in his hands and stood to his feet.

As he did so, the dizzy sensation returned, and he bent to the side. Once again, the footman and Constance were there to hold him up. Thomas looked down at Constance beside him.

He hadn't been having doubts about Constance, not at any moment throughout their time together, yet had he had any doubts,

that would have been the moment they evaporated. She had been in an accident, and yet here she was still holding him up and trying to protect him. What a woman she was!

The horse's hooves getting closer made Thomas flick his head away from Constance to look at his friend.

Antony was practically at their side now, just as he jumped down from the horse and looked at the carnage of their accident.

"In God's name . . ." Antony muttered. Behind Antony, further down the road, a carriage came into view.

Chapter 26

Viola

Viola had the carriage door opened even before it had stopped. She flung herself down just as it came to a halt. Antony was looking back at her. Her gaze found his for a brief moment before she saw the mess.

The entire street was covered in the broken carcass of what was once a fine-looking carriage. Viola felt her nausea grow stronger at the sight, with the carriage completely on its side and the broken fractured shards behind it. Among the mess stood Mr. Bennett and Constance.

Constance had a few cuts to her neck and arms.

“Constance.” Viola ran toward her sister, overwhelmed that she was all right.

“Viola? What are you doing here?” Constance looked between Viola and Antony. Viola could see the question in her eyes, but she ignored it. She had to ascertain first that Constance was well, before

anything else.

Constance released Mr. Bennett and stepped toward Viola. The two sisters met in the middle of the street. Viola's hands first went to her sister's, then they went to Constance's arms.

"Oh my God." Viola looked at each cut, fearing how deep they were.

"It's fine, Viola," Constance said, but it wasn't. It would never be fine again.

"It's not," Viola said miserably, feeling the tears coming quickly to her eyes. She didn't even bother trying to blink them away.

"I'm not badly harmed, Viola." Constance grabbed her hands tighter. "Believe me, I am well."

"You promise?" Viola needed to hear it again.

"I do." Constance nodded. "Viola, calm down," she ordered, but

Viola couldn't listen to her.

"I can't be calm, you don't understand!" Viola just stood there as Constance shook her arms. "This is all my fault." She watched, her stomach so tightly knotted now that it might as well turn to stone. Constance's eyes widened and her lip trembled.

"What do you mean?" Constance asked.

"Oh my God." Viola squeezed her sister's hand tightly. "It was the Marquess of Devonshire. He ordered the sabotage of your carriage."

A string of curses erupted at Viola's side. She flinched, just as Constance did. Antony and Mr. Bennett were the source of those curses.

"No, you don't understand." Viola shook her head, unable to keep staring at Antony. He was looking at her, waiting for her to say more. She was too fearful of his affection for her curdling to hate, so she turned to Constance instead, the one she truly owed the apology

to. “It is still my fault.”

“You’re not making any sense, Viola.” Constance’s face was a little pale now.

“The Marquess told me what he had done this morning.” Viola knew she wasn’t really making sense, yet she was in such a mess thatthe words just kept tumbling out.

“Why would he tell you?” Constance shook her head, clearly baffled.

“Partly because he is just a madman.” Viola truly believed it. “Partly because he thought I was on his side.” She swallowed: it was now or never. She had to pour her heart out to her sister. “Constance, I was incredibly jealous when Mr. Bennett started showing an interest in you.”

She waited for a moment, wanting to see what would happen with one particular person. She glanced over at Antony. He covered his mouth for a moment and looked away. The mere movement made

the knot in her stomach turn to agony. She looked back at Constance.

“I have always been jealous of you, Constance. How could I not be? Look at the two of us.” She gestured between them. “When Mr. Bennett started paying attention to you, it just made that envy all the worse.”

“Wait, Viola, wait.” Constance grabbed her hands further, entwining their fingers together. “You care for Mr. Bennett?”

“No.” The answer came quickly. Viola saw Constance frown in surprise.

“I really am struggling to follow this,” Constance said with a small smile. That smile did nothing to appease Viola’s despair.

“It was never really about Mr. Bennett.” Viola looked at Mr. Bennett who was watching the two of them with his jaw practically on the ground. “I’m sorry, Mr. Bennett. This won’t be pleasant to hear.” She looked back at Constance. “I may have had a crush on him at some point, but it was not about true affection. It never was. In fact, I

don't think we'd get along at all! Sorry," she said again in Mr. Bennett's direction.

"No offense taken," he said, bearing a small smile of his own.

"Constance, it was all about you," Viola said miserably. "And for that I am so sorry." She shook her head, knowing she could never make up for her mistakes. "The Marquess could see I was jealous of you. He kept talking to me. I don't know what happened, but he was suddenly persuading me to do things. In the hope that he would make you jealous."

A curse erupted at the side of them again.

"You said he was a manipulator." Antony was looking at Mr. Bennett.

"I had heard as much." Mr. Bennett nodded.

"I am so sorry, Constance." Viola felt her posture crumple. "I never meant to hurt you. I wasn't really thinking; I was just . . .

blinded by my envy of you. Our mother, she's always—" Viola broke off as a gasp in her cries took her over. She lifted a hand to her mouth and tried to muffle the cry. She could see Constance panic and step closer toward her.

"I know what she's like," Constance said gently. "In your position, I would have been jealous too."

"You would? I doubt that!" Viola shook her head. "There's not an evil bone in your body."

"Neither is there in yours, Viola," Constance was practically pleading with her. "The moment the Marquess of Devonshire told you what was to happen today, what did you do? You came here to my rescue!" Constance smiled. "Does that not show how unlike him you are?"

"He's an expert manipulator," Mr. Bennett spoke up. "He has a reputation for such things."

"He does?" Viola could barely believe it. She could just

remember the way he talked to her, the way that he made following his decisions sound so easy. Up until today.

“He does.” Mr. Bennett nodded.

“I’m so sorry, Constance,” Viola said again. Before she had even finished the words, Constance had wrapped her arms around her, pulling her into a warm embrace.

“No more of that,” Constance said warmly in her ear.

“How can you be so kind?” Viola asked, her voice strained.

“Because I know you, you fool.” Constance laughed softly and pulled back. “I know you never meant any harm to me. Look at the way you have ridden here!” She gestured to the carriage as she spoke. “Wait, how did you know, my lord?” Constance looked at Antony.

“Viola turned up at my door explaining what had happened,” Antony rushed to get the words out.

“I’m so sorry,” Viola said to Antony, but he did not look back at her. “And I owe you an apology too, Mr. Bennett.” Viola turned her eyes to Mr. Bennett. “I allowed my jealousy of my sister to convince me to try and break the two of you up. I quite understand if the two of you can’t forgive me. I will never forgive myself.”

“I have forgiven you already, Miss Viola.” Mr. Bennett was smiling, bewildering Viola completely.

“What?” she asked, feeling as though the ground would give way beneath her.

“I know what jealousy feels like, believe me.” Mr. Bennett nodded his head at Antony. “You should see how jealous I am of him, and he is my closest friend.”

“You’re jealous of me?” Antony frowned, looking his way. “Why?”

“Don’t be absurd, man. You have absolutely everything anyone could want.” Mr. Bennett shook his head. “See? Even now I sound

jealous. Believe me, Miss Viola. I can quite easily see how those feelings can be preyed upon by another. Knowing what I do of the Marquess of Devonshire, he preyed upon you at your weakest moment. He is the unforgivable party. Not you."

Viola was astonished, not knowing how to understand his kindness, so she looked back at Constance. Constance just held onto her sister's hand, waiting for her to say more.

"Does this mean you're done objecting to a courtship between me and Mr. Bennett?" Constance asked, with a smile.

"Of course I am." Viola shook her head. "I like to see how happy you make each other." Constance's smile grew greater.

"Then how could I not forgive you?" Constance drew her into another embrace and whispered something else in her ear. "That's two carriage accidents you've tried to save me from now. I think I should return the favor at some point."

Viola tried to smile through her tears, but it was difficult.

“Please say we can arrest the Marquess of Devonshire for this.” Mr. Bennett gestured to the broken carriage around them as Viola and Constance stepped back from their embrace.

“No!” Constance surprised everyone by saying.

“What?” Viola asked. “You must. He must pay for his actions!”

“And if he tells someone you knew about it this morning, what then?” Constance laced hers and Viola’s fingers together once more. “If this man is already a manipulator and can twist his words to suit his story, I don’t like the idea of how it would look in court.”

“Agreed,” Mr. Bennett said before Viola could say anything else.

“I don’t understand.” Antony’s voice made Viola look back at him. He was finally looking at her. Her breath hitched at the sight of those brown eyes staring at her. “You said it had nothing really to do with Mr. Bennett.”

“No.” Viola shook her head. “He just happened to be the one who paid Constance attention.” She swallowed and struggled to make her final confession aloud. “It’s the way it’s always been. Everyone looks at Constance.”

“I wish I could say that wasn’t true,” Constance said at her side.

“One second.” Antony stepped forward and took Viola’s other hand. He drew her away, further down the road, forcing her to drop Constance’s hand. Viola looked back at her sister as they walked off, watching as Mr. Bennett placed an arm around Constance’s shoulder. He whispered something in her ear, making Constance smile gently.

Once Antony and Viola were out of earshot, he pulled them to a halt, releasing her hand. She could have whimpered at the loss of the contact. She began trying to stop her tears instead.

“Say it again,” he said quietly.

“What?” she asked, confused.

“You don’t care for Thomas?” There was something desperate in his eyes.

“No.” She shook her head. “When I first met him, I thought him handsome, that was all.” She shrugged. “I could never talk with him the way you and I do,” she confessed, watching as his expression softened. “Antony.” She stepped toward him. “I perfectly understand if you can’t forgive me for what I have done, but I want you to know this.” She lifted her chin more and brushed the lock of hair that usually covered her scar back behind her ear. “I love you.”

“You do?” His eyebrows shot up in surprise. “Despite your efforts to push me away?”

“Well, you somehow worked your way into my heart despite all of that,” she explained in a rush. “I pushed you away not because I didn’t like you, but because I was jealous of Constance and unsure of myself. It’s sort of the way I have always been. If I didn’t hold onto that jealousy . . . in truth, I don’t know any other way to be. It has been that way for so long. Does that sound awful?”

“No,” he said softly. “It just means I know you all the better now.” The gentleness of his words made her stare into his eyes. She was so busy looking at them that she jumped when he reached for her hand and took it in his own. “Well, as it’s a time of confessions, you should know that I am hopelessly, and quite frankly, madly in love with you, too.”

Viola’s hand clasped his tighter. She wanted to question how it was possible, yet her lips wouldn’t move.

“You gave me hope from the day I saw that you put me into your painting,” he said quietly. She laughed at the idea, trying to stop her tears before they could start again.

“You have appeared in many more paintings since then,” she revealed.

“Have I?” he asked, a smile spreading across his features. “Then it’s settled.” He gestured for her other hand. She gave it to him. “From here on, I want to start afresh.”

“Afresh?” she repeated, rather liking the idea. “In what way?”

“No secrets between us now,” he hurried on. “When you’re jealous of your sister, tell me, please.”

“Even if it’s an awful thing to admit?” She winced at the idea.

“So what if it is? We are all human, we all feel these things,” he explained. “Thomas has just explained he’s jealous of me, which I find very mad indeed, but there you are. We are all human! So, no secrets between us. Agreed?”

She smiled as he continued to hold tightly onto her hands. She rather wished they weren’t in a street with eyes watching. She would have infinitely preferred to be somewhere else alone with him.

“Agreed.” She nodded. “Then you should know that it was you that made me realize what a fool I had been.”

“It was?” he questioned, tilting his head to the side.

“When we were dancing at the ball last night,” she went on. “The whole time we were dancing, I couldn’t stop wondering why on earth I had pushed you away in the first place. It was as if you cleared the fog from my mind that the Marquess of Devonshire induced.”

“If I ever see that man again . . .” Antony trailed off, leaving it up to imagination. When his eyes returned to hers, there was a softness to them.

“I love you.” She found the words came even easier the second time.

Chapter 27

Antony

Antony felt a warmth swell inside of him. That butterfly sensation that was always in his stomach when he was around Viola had erupted into something else now, something altogether more encompassing, something that enveloped his body in a feeling of excitement and happiness.

She loves me.

It was all he had wanted to hear her say from the moment that he had met her. He just kept repeating it in his head.

She truly loves me.

He looked down at Viola as she clutched his hands. Her cheeks were tear-stained from her crying, but those hazel eyes were turned up to him, wide and glistening. The lock of hair she always wore across her cheek was no longer there; it was behind her ear.

He felt as though he were truly looking at her completely now.

As he had once said to Thomas, he liked someone who you had to peel back the layers with, in order to know the truth of their heart. Now, he could see Viola's heart.

That heart had been diminished and hurt by her mother and other people choosing her sister over her for so long, and it was little wonder that envy could come from that.

Now was the time to change things.

"Tonight, I shall visit your father," he said quietly. He glanced down the road, aware that Thomas and Miss Constance were watching them avidly, but he was pleased they were out of earshot. This was private, a conversation for only him and Viola.

"My father?" Viola asked in wonder.

"To ask if I have his permission to court you." He smiled, returning his gaze to her. He watched as her smile grew greater. Another tear escaped her eye. Antony didn't care how avidly they were being watched now. He loosened one of his hands and lifted his

fingers to her cheek, cupping it gently and brushing away the tear with his thumb. “If he says yes, would you say yes?”

“Without hesitation,” she murmured softly. Antony had never known one happiness come after another so quickly. His heart was beating so strongly he could feel it thudding in his chest.

“What’s going on over there?” Thomas’ voice disturbed them. They both glanced that way to Thomas and Miss Constance.

“A minute more, Thomas!” Antony cried back.

“What would their father say if he finds out I allowed you to be alone with his daughter so far away from a chaperone!?” Thomas teased.

“You can see us, can’t you?” Antony said back, watching as Thomas laughed.

“I wish we were alone,” Viola confessed, pulling Antony’s attention back to her.

“I do too.” He lifted one of her hands and kissed the back of it, ignoring the way the others were watching them. He felt something hitch in his stomach as he did so. She was watching him closely too. The move was slow, sensual, and he could tell Viola’s breathing had increased.

“Antony, we need to get off the road!” Thomas called again.

“Has he always been this annoying?” Viola frowned, making Antony chuckle warmly.

“He has; you just haven’t noticed before.” Antony looped her hand through his arm. “Come on, we need to get out of here.”

Viola didn’t take her eyes off him as they walked back to the others; he could feel it.

“So . . .” Constance was bobbing on her toes. “Is everything settled? Everyone forgiven?” She addressed her question to Antony.

“Well, if your father says yes, Viola has agreed to a courtship. I think you could call that settled.” He smiled as he looked back down at Viola.

“Thank goodness for that.” Thomas sighed. “I couldn’t watch you go through anymore heartbreak.”

At these words, Viola hung her head. It immediately made that lock of hair fall in front of her cheek again.

“Thomas,” Antony said. “Go clear up the mess of your carriage.”

“Me?” Thomas gestured to himself.

“Yes, you!” Antony pointed away again. “You’ve caused enough mischief as it is.”

“I didn’t do anything.” Thomas put on a look of innocence, but he walked away regardless. Constance stayed by their side.

Antony pulled Viola toward him and tilted up her head with a

gentle nudge to her chin. She looked up at him, wide eyed, as he took the lonely lock of hair that he had dreamt of taking for so long and pushed it behind her ear.

"No more of this." He said, pushing it back.

"Of what?" she asked.

"Hiding." He brushed the scar on her cheek with his thumb. "We've established I love you exactly as you are." As Viola smiled, tearing up again, a sound came from beside them.

"Oh." Constance clutched both hands to her chest. "Father better say yes to this courtship!"

Antony led Viola into the house. He still hadn't let go of her hand. Behind them, Thomas and Miss Constance entered too, along with the driver, the footman, and Lily.

"In here." Antony gestured to the nearest sitting room. "I have already called for a physician."

As they waited for the physician to arrive, Antony urged Viola and Constance to go and freshen up. Spare guest rooms were always prepared, on the off chance, so he ushered them upstairs with his housekeeper in tow. He was reluctant to part from Viola's grasp, though he had to.

When no one was looking, he pulled her back, kissing her hand once more before he let her go up the stairs. Every few steps up, she glanced back, that delightful blush creeping across her cheeks once more.

He stared after her, long after she left, feeling a kind of contentment he had not known before. It was only dispelled when Thomas came to clap him on the shoulder.

"You're staring," Thomas said, looking up the stairs with him.

"Can't help it." Antony sighed and dropped his voice to a whisper. "She loves me, Thomas. She said so."

Thomas squeezed his shoulder once more, a kind of brotherly satisfaction.

“I can’t tell you how happy I am for you,” Thomas acknowledged, just as the physician came through the door. “Ah, could you see to my driver first?” Thomas pointed the physician toward the sitting room. “He has the worst injuries by far.”

As the physician hurried away, Antony turned to face Thomas and folded his arms.

“Are you really jealous of me?” Antony asked.

“I am.” Thomas nodded. “It’s a testament to how good a person you are that despite my envy we became friends anyway.” Thomas smiled and walked into the room, with Antony on his tail, shaking his head.

Antony watched as Thomas was patched up by the physician. Once done, they both sat at the far side of the room, with Thomas sipping from a small glass of brandy.

“How are you?” Antony asked as Thomas shakily took a chair again.

“I’m fine,” Thomas insisted, though he winced as he said it. “At least, I will be. The physician said so, so it must be true.”

“The accident.” Antony whistled. “From the mess, it had to be a miracle you all weren’t hurt much worse.”

“Yes,” Thomas agreed with a nod. “The Marquess of Devonshire should pay for what he did today.”

“Viola was right,” Antony muttered, pouring himself a glass of brandy and deciding to join Thomas. “He really must be a madman. To be so jealous that he would willingly harm you both in that way. He was willing to risk Constance’s life just to get back at you!”

“That’s not jealousy. What Viola felt was jealousy, what I feel is jealousy. What Lawrence felt was nothing short of obsession,” Thomas surmised.

Antony sat back in his chair, realizing how right Thomas was. It was a danger just how mad the man had become.

"What are we going to do?" Antony lowered his voice to a whisper, looking around the room, but the others were so far away that they wouldn't be able to hear him. "Miss Constance is right. If the Marquess of Devonshire ends up in court, he could drag Viola's name into it. What if he were to lie and say it was all her idea?" Antony asked, fearful of the answer. "We already know he can charm people into doing things. Who do we think a court would listen to? Viola or the word of a marquess and future duke?" He watched as Thomas hung his head.

"You're right." Thomas sighed. "Lawrence can't be brought to justice without Viola being dragged down too. We can't do that."

"We can't," Antony said firmly. In short, he would never let that happen. She had been too badly hurt in her life as it was. Now, he saw it as his duty to protect her. Forever more. That started right now, with protecting her from any further danger that the Marquess of

Devonshire presented.

He sat back in his chair but felt something behind him. He sat forward a second later, reaching for the thing that had interrupted his comfort. He tore it out of its position, half laughing at what it was. One of the scandal sheets.

"Ah, it's one of the ones that mention you." Antony gestured to Thomas as he flicked through the pages. "Where they call Miss Constance the Sapphire of the Season."

As Antony read the words, he felt again the ache for Viola. It wasn't even mentioned that Miss Constance had an older sister. So many people treated Viola as though she weren't there.

That ends today.

"She is." Thomas sighed. "Quite the Sapphire of the Season."

Antony kept his mouth shut. Constance was a beauty, it couldn't be denied, yet he felt he was winning the best prize of all. Constance

may have been the Sapphire, but Viola was the Diamond; you just had to look for a little longer to see how special she was.

"Wait . . ." Antony said, looking at the scandal sheet a little harder.

"You look as if you've thought of something," Thomas said, downing what was left of the brandy.

"That's because I have." Antony flicked through the pages again. "You hated this thing so much because it discussed in detail your exploits as a rogue, correct?"

"Yes, but I would dearly like to forget about those days now that I know Constance," Thomas explained as though the matter were obvious.

"No, Thomas, you miss my point." Antony gathered himself, leaning forward again and gesturing with the scandal sheet in the air. "This little thing can make or destroy reputations, can't it?"

“I suppose.” Thomas frowned, clearly not following his point.

“So even if we can’t get justice in the courts, what if we just destroyed the Marquess’ reputation using *this* instead?” This time, Antony could see his words had struck a chord with Thomas.

Thomas paused in the middle of filling up his glass, nearly sloshing the brandy everywhere as he looked at Antony.

“Keep talking,” Thomas beckoned him to continue.

“What if we let out a whisper that it was believed the Marquess of Devonshire orchestrated a carriage accident? We don’t have to mention any of our names, we keep all of us out of it, especially Viola and Miss Constance,” Antony rushed to explain.

“You think people would believe it without specifics?” Thomas frowned.

“No gossip has been doubted yet, even with a distinct lack of evidence, has it?” Antony was growing more and more excited by the

idea. Thomas was nodding slowly now.

“Yes, that could work.” Thomas sat forward. “If the scandal sheet were to publish such gossip, the Marquess would have no chance to bring Viola’s name into it.”

“And his reputation would be . . .” Antony made a hand gesture, to show how diminished it would be. “It’s small recompense for what he tried to do to you, Miss Constance, and Viola, but it’s something.”

Antony watched as Thomas smiled.

“Do it.” Thomas nodded. “The rest of the matter stays between us.”

“Agreed.” Antony stood to his feet again, just as Viola appeared in the doorway. They smiled across the room at each other. Antony felt rather like a silly boy, infatuated for the first time, yet it was stronger, much stronger than that. It was a deep bond, rooted into his very soul. “I’ll get Viola home.”

“Yes.” Thomas stood too. “There’s no way Constance and I can go to our picnic now. Take Viola home and then Constance and I will head back this evening.”

It was a good idea, though after today, Antony was going to find it very difficult to part from Viola’s company at all.

Thomas

Thomas held tightly onto Constance’s hand beside him as they rode in Antony’s borrowed carriage back to her house. It was some hours later, with the sun beginning to set. A messenger had been sent to his parents’ country seat, telling them of what had happened, and they had then spent the afternoon in the physician’s company, who watched Thomas for a little while to make sure there were no adverse effects from his bump to the head. Fortunately, all was well.

“I’m afraid,” Thomas confessed as Constance looked questioningly at him.

“Of what?” she asked, moving closer to his side. Opposite them sat Lily, but as far as her duties as chaperone went, she seemed quite

lax at the moment. They had all survived an awful crash that day, after all. Sitting a little bit too close together was hardly the sin of the century when they were all relieved to be alive.

"It was my responsibility to keep you safe." Thomas sighed deeply. "What will your father say when I tell him of this accident?"

"You worry too much." Constance shook her head.

"Do I?" Thomas asked. "Your parents dote on you."

"They do, but my parents . . . Wait, no." Constance stopped herself. "I was about to say my parents are sensible people, though in truth, my mother is not. My father is, however, a sensible man. He knows that carriage accidents happen. Just as the one Viola and I were in so many years ago. It is no one's fault. My father will not hold you accountable. Besides, who was it who wrapped their arms around me and tried to save me from harm?"

Thomas smiled, in spite of his worry.

“You are the most wonderful person I have ever met,” Thomas said quietly to her, watching her smile grew even greater.

“That’s not possible.” She shook her head.

“Why not?”

“Because I am looking at the most wonderful person,” she explained with a glimmer in her eye.

As the carriage came to a stop, Thomas looked out, surprised to see that Mrs. Henderson was already on the doorstep. Antony had sent a messenger ahead of them to explain about the carriage accident, and it seemed Mrs. Henderson could barely wait for Constance’s arrival to ascertain she was well.

As they stepped out of the carriage, Viola and Mr. Henderson appeared behind Mrs. Henderson.

While Mrs. Henderson fussed over Constance, practically touching every part of her to ensure she was safe, Thomas looked at

Viola and offered a smile that she returned. After today, he felt he knew her much better, and there had been no denying the way Viola looked at Antony. She truly did love him, and that fact made Thomas like her all the more.

After today, he vowed to himself to always endeavor not to misunderstand her again. Viola was proof that a lot of passion and turmoil could be happening within someone so quiet, even if Thomas couldn't see it.

He hoped they would be friends after today.

"Mr. Henderson." Thomas moved to Mr. Henderson's side. "I'm so sorry—"

"None of that!" Mr. Henderson shook off his apology before it could even begin. "Just tell me you are all right, Mr. Bennett."

"I am, thank you." Thomas nodded.

"Then that is excellent news." Mr. Henderson turned to look at

Constance. “You looked after her, Mr. Bennett, in something as hair-raising as a carriage accident. For that, I can never thank you enough.” Mr. Henderson smiled just as Viola did too.

Thomas looked over at Constance, watching her as she moved away from her mother and into Viola’s arms. The two sisters embraced warmly, for so long that Thomas thought they would never let go of each other.

Chapter 28

Viola

One month later . . .

Viola's eyes shot open. There was sunlight in her chamber, which had to mean it was morning already, and today was the day. She sat up in her bed, breathless, looking around the room. As the truth crashed over her, of exactly what day it was, she wriggled in the bed and covered her mouth, stifling the cry of excitement.

Today was her wedding day.

To say hers and Antony's courtship had been short was an understatement. Barely a week passed before he had asked her to marry him. The preparations had been just as quick, with the banns read out three Sundays in a row and here they were. About to be married.

Viola flung herself back onto the bed, letting her hair spill around her head on the pillow, recalling their courtship with a smile.

After the crash, Antony has stayed true to his word, turning up

that very evening to speak with her father in an exceptionally fine suit indeed. Viola had paced up and down outside her father's study, waiting desperately to hear what her father would say. When the study door eventually opened and her father was there, smiling, it told her all she needed to know. He had embraced her and offered his congratulations.

Since then, Antony and she barely spent a day apart. For the first week, they began each day walking around the garden at her house. Sometimes he would beg to see her paintings, and other times he would take her out. They even revisited Somerset House. Only this time, the whole exhibition was done side by side.

Viola had been marveling at how easy it was to enjoy his company on the seventh day when she was in the hothouse at the back of his townhouse. They had barely stopped talking in all their time together and the more and more flirtatious Antony was, the more she found she loved him. At the hothouse, their chaperone had sat in the corner, fanning herself with her attempt at embroidery to stay cool and Viola had been marveling at the great banana plants. Her praise dispelled when she had turned around to see Antony down on one

knee.

She had said yes so quickly that Antony had barely finished the question, making them both laugh all the more.

After that moment, no days were spent without one another, and on occasion Archibald even accompanied them on their walks, acting as chaperone and getting to know more about his future son-in-law at the same time.

There was one moment in the courtship, however, that still made Viola sad. It was when they had told her mother of the wedding. Naturally, Jane had been thrilled. Overawed, even. No, it was the initial shock that had gutted Viola so much.

“I beg your pardon?” Jane had said around the dinner table as her father revealed the betrothal.

“The Marquess of Salisbury asked for Viola’s hand in marriage, and I gave my blessing,” Archibald exclaimed. Constance had squealed in delight, ran round the table and enveloped Viola in her arms in a

tight embrace. Jane just dropped her cutlery on her plate; it clattered loudly and drew everyone's attention.

"He did? Are you sure?" Jane's simple words had made Viola freeze in her chair. She was rather certain that Constance's embrace was the only thing keeping her sitting, and she clung to her sister tighter. "I didn't realize that the Marquess . . ." She had trailed off.

"Jane," Archibald has said quietly, but firmly. "Is it not wonderful news?"

"It is." Then Jane seemed to gather herself. Suddenly her face had pinged into a smile, and she had clapped her hands together. "Oh, it's fantastic news! Our Viola, to be married to a future duke!"

Even then, despite her mother's happiness, Viola had been saddened. As Jane tried to hug her, Viola had clung onto Constance, not wanting to let go of her sister just yet. Antony had been reduced to a "future duke" in her mother's eyes, showing that Jane hadn't really noticed the man before, only his title.

Viola supposed that she and her mother would never have the best of relationships. Yet that worry was for another day. Today was about her and Antony.

Antony!

She leapt out of the bed and threw back the covers. She turned in a small circle in the room first, giddy with excitement, and then flung herself down at her dresser, looking into the mirror.

She loved Antony so strongly these days; it was hardly surprising how excited she was to marry him. She craved no one else's conversation as much. He had also promised to take her travelling soon. Even on their honeymoon, he had promised to take her to all the beauties they had talked of, including Wiltshire. He was going to show her some of the white chalk horses and Stonehenge, too.

There were, of course, other reasons she was excited. She hadn't even yet kissed Antony; their chaperones were always far too eager in their jobs to allow such stolen moments. Yet Antony's whispered flirtations had promised her there was more to discover. She didn't

know much of what happened between men and women after marriage, but when Antony was near, she felt heated and tingly. She was quite certain that whatever it was married people shared, it would be something special.

She picked up her white powder, ready to apply it to her cheek, when she hesitated. It was customary, wasn't it? She wore this white powder every day to cover up some of her scar, though in truth it did little good. Yet Antony's words came back to her.

Just earlier that week, they had been together in a teashop down the road when some ladies that Viola had no liking for had entered. She had often heard them gossip of her. Just as predicted, they had pointed at her across the teashop. As was her habit, she leaned forward, letting her hair cross her cheek yet again.

"What did I say about this?" Antony said softly and leaned toward her, pushing the curl back behind her ear.

"People are looking at me," she explained and gestured with her eyes toward the group. He glanced their way before looking back at

her.

“I’m looking at you too.” He smiled. “And I love you as you are. You never need to hide with me, remember.”

Now, as she stared into the mirror, she tucked her hair back behind her ears and stared at the scar. Perhaps it was time to abandon the powder. She dropped it back into its little dish. Somehow, it wasn’t even enough. She closed up the dish completely and tucked it away in a drawer.

“I do not need it anymore,” she said aloud to herself, staring into the mirror. Her appearance was somehow more acceptable to her now. Granted, people would never adore her the way they adored Constance, her mother certainly wouldn’t, and people would still gossip, but she did not need to shy away from her appearance anymore.

Viola closed the drawer with something of a flourish, giggling at her own resolve. She practically felt a different woman.

The wedding was still a few hours away. Impatient to get ready, Viola tried to calm her nerves. It would be a while before she could see Antony. Missing him already, she reached for another drawer in her dresser and pulled out his latest letter to her. This letter had been both a love letter and one bearing good news. She poured over the words again.

To my love,

The fact we cannot see each other the morning before our wedding is a fact I find particularly heartbreaking. Thomas and my father keep telling me it is tradition and that tradition must be maintained, but I find myself wanting to defy tradition! If I could come to you tomorrow morning before the ceremony and the wedding breakfast, just to walk with you again in the garden, I would. As it is, I think Thomas will have to wrestle me back from the door to keep me here.

She giggled at the image.

There is another matter I must tell you of, because I think it will put your mind at rest. You may remember Thomas and I spreading a certain

rumor about the Marquess of Devonshire, and you will remember it being published earlier this week in the scandal sheet. Even I have to say I wasn't expecting the writer to be as open as they were with it. They practically condemned the Marquess as a murderer, yet they knew no details of who had been in the accident or if anyone had been hurt. I have received word today, you will be delighted to hear, that the Marquess of Devonshire has left the country. I have it on rather good authority that, fearing the aftermath of this news in the ton, he wished to part from it. He travelled to the Continent this morning by ship, and no one knows if he is to return or not. I think it is therefore safe to say that we have all lost that odious man from our lives.

Now, to a cheerier matter. The day after our wedding we shall be leaving for our honeymoon, but before we go there is a gift that I wish to give you. Remind me of it tomorrow, if I should forget. For I feel I will be so caught up in the knowledge that you are I will be vowed to one another forever, that it shall slip my mind!

I must say goodbye, because my father is looking at me across the room demanding quite loudly that I need sleep before the wedding. Thomas beside him is begging that we stay up for another drink. I'm tempted to

agree with Thomas, for I fear I will not sleep tonight because of all the excitement of being with you tomorrow.

At least then, we'll never have to part from one another again.

Yours, for always,

Antony

Viola pressed the letter to her chest, somehow hoping she could envelop it into her heart.

There was a gentle rapping at the door.

"Who is it?" Viola asked, turning to the closed door.

"Who is it, honestly." Constance laughed. "Who do you think it is?" Viola laughed too and bid her come in.

However, Constance was not alone. Behind her was Jane, her face also full of laughter as she carried a box.

“Well, come on!” She waved at Viola who was still sitting at the vanity table. “We have a wedding to prepare for.”

“We have more than enough time,” Constance brushed off the idea and came to Viola’s side.

“Not to my mind,” Viola admitted and looked back at the mirror, wondering what to do first. Within seconds, Constance was in front of her, attending to her face and hair, while Jane wandered around the room, getting things in order. The gown was taken out and the gloves too.

Within an hour, she was pretty much ready. She was dressed in the long slim-fitting white gown that flattered her figure perfectly and had been specially made by the modiste for the wedding. Around the bust, there was delicate lace, beaded to form small birds, as though fluttering across a sky. Along the hem of the train was the same pattern. There were short cap sleeves, so short that they were just a slip of silken material that caressed her shoulders. The open neckline gave way to a simple golden necklace, with the pendant hanging down to the top of her chest.

The long white gloves on her arms were the same ivory color as the dress, reaching up to her elbow and embellished at each wrist with another lace bird. Her shoes were also the same color, but along the small heels of the slipper style shoes were tiny gold-colored bows, tying in all the colors perfectly.

"Viola." Constance appeared behind her in the mirror, fussing with the last curls of hair. "You do look beautiful."

"Thank you." Viola smiled, feeling the full compliment, yet she couldn't help but touch her cheek one more time, before she remembered that she hadn't applied any powder at all. She realized how automatic the move was now, just a habit formed over the years as a way to hide the scar. She didn't need that habit anymore. She lifted her chin a little higher; she was feeling brave today. How could she not be when Antony was waiting for her at the altar?

"I have a gift for you." Jane's words clearly startled Constance as much as they did Viola, for in the mirror she could see they both whipped their heads round, turning to look at Jane. She had a box in

her hands and was presenting it to Viola. “Come, sit down.”

Viola took the chair at her vanity table again, curious as to what could be in the box, just as Jane placed it on the table in front of her.

“Open it,” Jane encouraged her. Viola glanced back at Constance before turning to open the box, seeking out the silent encouragement of Constance’s nod.

The folds of the box came easily away under her fingers, giving way to something that glittered beneath the covering. Viola held her breath in anticipation, as a tiara was revealed, shining in the sunlight that peeped through the sheer curtains.

“What is this?” she asked, her gaze never leaving the tiara as she uttered the question. Her eyes were too busy tracing each gem that studded the stunning coronet. It was simple and yet elegant, with gold wire wrapped together in twines and beautiful diamonds periodically appearing across the gold.

“It belonged to your grandmother,” Jane said with a smile. “My

mother. And on my wedding day, she gave it to me." Jane reached into the box and lifted up the tiara, holding it high in the air. "It is a tradition in our family. It is passed down to the eldest daughter on her wedding day. Now it goes to you, sweetheart."

"How old is it?" Constance asked while Viola was too busy admiring it.

"I am not sure, perhaps a hundred years," Jane answered.

Viola was amazed. She had never heard of the tiara before, and had she known, she would have expected Jane to give the piece to Constance, regardless of tradition. Viola tried to swallow, feeling a lump in her throat at the emotion of it all.

"You really want me to have it?" Viola had to ask, needing that reassurance just as Jane placed the tiara on her head, tucking the bands into her locks.

"Of course I do." Jane smiled again. "I hope one day you will give it to your daughter, too." As she finished arranging the tiara on

Viola's head, her fingers dropped down to the loose locks around Viola's cheek.

Viola stiffened, waiting for the inevitable action. Once again, Jane would pull the curl across her cheek, hiding that scar. Yet she didn't.

Viola relaxed as she noticed Jane pushing the curl behind her ear instead and even behind the band of the tiara, so that it would stay there for the rest of the day.

"Pretty as a picture," Constance said, standing beside them, using the phrase they so often exchanged.

Viola only had eyes for her mother in that moment, too overwhelmed by both the tiara and the simple action of pushing the curl behind her ear.

Perhaps she would never be her mother's favorite, but this . . . this showed just how much her mother did love her, beneath all her oddities.

“I’m very proud of you, sweetheart.” Jane smiled and stood to her feet. “Come on, Constance, our turn now!” As the two hurried to dress themselves, Viola turned to look in the mirror at the tiara on her head. She rather liked the idea of someday passing it down to her own daughter.

The thought of this made her think of Antony and everything they were about to embark upon together, and she watched as her cheeks blushed with excitement, turning almost as red as her auburn hair.

Antony was right. She could barely sit still for excitement herself.

Chapter 29

Antony

"Cold feet yet?" Thomas asked as he reached Antony's side.

"Never." Antony laughed with a shake of his head. "I have been thinking of this moment since I met Viola. I am hardly going to change my mind now."

"This would certainly be the most difficult moment to change your mind." Thomas chuckled and gestured at the space around them.

Antony let his eyes wander across the church. It was a fine one indeed, just down the road from where the Hendersons lived. The sunlight was glowing through these great towering stretches of stained glass, turning what would have been a white church into a rainbow of different colors. As Antony looked around the room, he could see everyone's faces lit in these colors, including his father's as he took a seat in the nearest pew.

"Tired yet?" his father asked, so close to him that no one else could hear.

“Of course not,” Antony said, though he was trying to stifle a yawn.

“I told you, you should have gone to bed sooner.” His father laughed in that knowing way and folded his arms.

“I do not think I slept a wink last night.” Antony bobbed on his toes as his eyes moved back to the church door, impatiently.

“Relax, man,” Thomas said at his side. “She’s still got five minutes yet. She’s not running out on you.”

“I know that. Call it impatience.” Antony waved him off.

“Clearly my role as best man to reduce any nerves isn’t needed,” Thomas pointed out with a smile.

“True.” Antony looked back at him.

“What should I do, then?” Thomas teased.

“Stand there and look the part,” Antony acknowledged with a nod, before lowering his voice to a whisper. “And I’ll do the same when your turn comes around.”

Thomas’ smile took on a new dimension, one that showed how easy it was to smile when talking of his marriage. Antony was one of the few people Thomas had told that he had already asked Archibald’s permission to marry Constance. Now, he just had to wait for the right opportunity to ask Constance to marry him.

Antony rather suspected that Thomas was holding off until after his wedding for Viola’s sake. She’d had enough limelight inadvertently taken by Constance in her life. Now Thomas was getting to know the real Viola, he seemed almost as keen as Antony to make sure that Viola had her own special day, too.

Before Antony could say anymore, he was aware of the vicar moving to his shoulder by the altar. Dressed in his robes with the bible already in his hands, they were about to begin. The door to the church opened, earning Antony’s gaze once again.

As the door swung open, Archibald stepped in with Viola on his arm, and Constance and Jane walked behind the two of them.

When Antony caught sight of Viola, he felt himself breathe in, but the breath did not leave him for a little while. It was taken completely by the sight of her. She was elegant in her regal white dress and gloves, and the tiara in her hair, encrusted with diamonds, contrasted her auburn hair perfectly. She was quite the vision as she walked down the aisle on her father's arm, with her eyes never leaving his.

He couldn't stop his smile. It spread so wide that he expected it went from ear to ear. Only when she reached his side and the church organ came to a soft conclusion did he look away from her and at her father, who was extending his hand. Antony shook Archibald's hand once before Archibald placed Viola's hand into Antony's.

The moment they touched, he felt the heat of her palm, as strong as his own.

With his other hand, he lifted the short veil over her face and laid it across her hair, making the tiara and her face even more visible than before.

“You look as if you have stepped out of a painting,” he said softly, so quietly that no one but her could hear him.

“I was about to say the same of you,” she said, just as quietly. Her eyes were on his suit. He had spent forever at the tailor deciding on the perfect outfit, and now he could see how well they fit together.

His tailcoat was slim fitting, his cream breeches were too, but it was the white and gold waistcoat, inlaid with swirls, that matched the color scheme of her dress perfectly.

“Ah-em,” the vicar cleared his throat, breaking their moment. Antony held tighter to Viola’s hand as he drew her toward the vicar.

As the vicar opened the sermon, Antony’s mind went back to the man he had met in Singapore and to what he had said about the day he met his wife.

From the first look, there was never going to be anyone else.

How right that man had been.

Viola

"I, Viola Henderson . . ." As Viola repeated her vows to Antony, she was overcome with emotion. So much so that she could feel tears prick the backs of her eyes. She had to keep breathing smoothly, so that her tears wouldn't spoil her vows. "Take thee, Antony Webster, to be my wedded husband." With the latter word, she could see Antony's smile grow greater. "To have and to hold from this day forward, for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, till death do us part, according to God's holy ordinance; and thereto I pledge thee my faith."

"Excellent. Now, my lord, repeat after me . . ." The vicar led Antony into the vows. Viola saw Antony take the wedding ring that Thomas had placed on the bible. He held tightly to her hand as he held the ring in the air.

“With this ring, I thee wed. With my body, I thee worship.” He paused, just a beat. It was a flirtation that made her blush in front of so many people, but it was a wedding vow after all; she could hardly think too much of it. “And with all my worldly goods I thee endow. In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Ghost. Amen.”

He slipped the ring onto her finger. With their close position and with his hand so tightly wrapped in hers, she felt a tremble go up her spine, one of excitement and love. She never wanted to be away from this man again.

There was another sermon from the vicar before things came to a close.

“I now pronounce you husband and wife. You may kiss the bride.” As the vicar led the round of the applause and others joined in, Antony looked back at Viola. Those rich brown eyes on her own made her breath hitch.

They hadn’t yet kissed. They had always been chaperoned, constantly so. There hadn’t been a single moment to steal something

akin to a kiss. Until now.

As he lowered his lips to hers, she held her breath, waiting for it. She had not been expecting the swell of warmth in her chest, nor how the applause grew greater as they kissed. As well as the sensation of finally being kissed, it was the thrill of being so close to Antony, of expressing their love for one another through such a simple yet devoted act.

They held the kiss for a little longer. It was simple, just a press of lips, yet somehow still scintillating. Viola would have happily stayed kissing him for some time if it had not been for Thomas clearing his throat behind them. Antony leaned back, chuckling at Thomas' interruption.

"Soon, we will have no interruptions," he whispered to her and threaded her hand through his arm, walking her back down the aisle.

Viola couldn't take her eyes off him as they walked together. They were married. After what could only be described as a somewhat turbulent start, everything had fallen into place, and they were

married at last.

“What was this gift you promised me?” Viola asked as the wedding breakfast was coming to a close.

It was held at Antony’s house, in his garden. Antony had argued it was a waste not to enjoy the glorious day by sitting inside and Viola agreed, especially when she saw that Antony had had his staff set up the tables in the finest part of the garden. They sat among hedgerows of roses and honeysuckle, eating their breakfast as their guests chatted and drank to their hearts’ content.

“Ah, your gift!” Antony smiled and sat back. “I did almost forget.” He lifted up her hand and kissed the back of it.

“You did not.” She shook her head. “You were so keen to remember that you told me to remind you of it.”

“That I did.” He nodded. “But I was incredibly distracted.”

“By what?” she asked as he lifted her hand to his lips.

“What do you think?” he said, his voice deep, as he turned her hand over and placed a quick kiss to her wrist. It didn’t matter to her that it was through her gloves; she could still feel the heat of it. “Come with me, I’ll show you now.”

Everyone was so caught up in their celebrations, with Jane and Archibald deep in conversation with Antony’s parents, and Thomas and Constance both wrapped up in their own conversation, that Viola and Antony were able to slip away very easily.

As Antony drew her back into the house, they slipped past some of the staff, who were bringing out fresh tea and coffee for their guests. Antony thanked them all as they passed and led her toward the drawing room. Once inside, he closed the door behind them, instantly muffling the sound of the staff and the distant chatter from outside.

“What is it then?” she asked.

“Close your eyes first.” He halted in front of her, so she narrowed her eyes. “That’s not quite closed. A little more.” She giggled and

closed them completely. “Now, trust me.”

With her hands in his, she let him draw her across the distance of the room. They navigated the furniture easily enough. She trusted him, completely, meaning she didn’t doubt for one second that he would look after her as they crossed the room.

“Now, wait here a second,” he said as he moved his hands. Suddenly, he was no longer standing in front of her, but behind her, his hands on her shoulders. He lowered his head and whispered in her ear. “On the count of three, open your eyes. One . . . two . . .” Before he said three, he dropped a tender kiss to the crook of her neck. She gasped at the thrill his simple touch caused. “Three.”

She opened her eyes, just as he lifted his head from her neck.

In front of her, on the wall of the drawing room, was a new painting she had not seen before. It was quite Constable in style, though not completely him. There was something more dream-like in the brushstrokes. The painting was of one of the white chalk horses in Wiltshire. Across the great expanse, with clouds billowing above, the

horse could have been practically riding across the hill, toward its freedom.

“Oh my.” She stepped toward it, growing lost in the detail on the horse and the way the clouds practically seemed to move above the horse. “It is quite exquisite.”

“I know how much you like the white horses. This is a painting of the one you can see from the garden of my country seat,” Antony explained.

“Truly?” She whipped her head back round in amazement.

“It is, and you’ll be able to see it for yourself soon enough, once I get to take you there on our honeymoon.” He softly took her shoulders and turned her back to the painting again. “The painter may not quite have your skill—”

“You are in jest! He is excellent! Of the like I could never hope to match.” Viola laughed.

“Well, I disagree.”

“Yes, but you are biased.” She twisted her head, looking up at him.

“That I am,” he agreed. “Entirely biased.” He placed his lips to her forehead, kissing her again. “I know how much you love paintings of the countryside, and I was keen for you to have one you can call your own. Though I hope it will be somewhere we can escape together.”

“I can’t think of anyone else I’d rather escape with,” she said quietly.

“You know something.” He leaned down toward her. “Now I’ve kissed you once, I don’t think I can keep myself from stopping.”

“I’m not complaining,” she teased, earning a soft chuckle from him before he closed the distance between them. This time, as his lips touched hers, they didn’t have to worry about anyone watching them. Viola sank into the kiss, her hands coming up to cling to his shoulders

as he deepened the kiss.

When they parted, they were both breathless, so much so that she could feel him breathing against her lips.

“You remember such incredible details about me,” she said, gently gesturing with her eyes to the painting.

“I remember everything you ever told me, my love.” As he kissed her again, she realized how lucky she was, to not only have found someone to love, but for that someone to love her back, foibles, faults and all. They fit together as well as his hands did as they rested on the curve of her waist.

Chapter 30

Constance

"Mrs. Henderson, may I steal Miss Constance away for a minute?" Thomas asked.

Constance looked away from Jane, who she had been deep in conversation with. They had been discussing the wedding and how happy Viola looked when Thomas approached.

"Yes, of course," Jane said quickly, practically taking Constance's elbow and pushing her to her feet herself. "Off you go, sweetheart."

"Mother," Constance said, despairing of her mother's obvious nature, but Jane simply giggled and gave them a little wave.

Thomas offered his arm to her and Constance took it, quite glad to be away from the main party at the table now.

"Thank you for giving me my escape!" Constance said, sighing with relief.

“Any time,” he said quickly, with a smile on his face that suggested there was more to his act than just giving her an escape.

“I believe there is something on your mind, Thomas.” Constance gestured to his face.

“Is there? How can you tell?” he asked, apparently attempting to be serious, but his smile just crept through.

“It’s all over your face.” Constance pointed to his smile again.

“Ah, and I thought I was being so clever in my ruse,” he said with a whisper.

“Aha! So there is an ulterior motive to our little walk around the garden.” Constance gestured to the party. There were many heads looking their way.

“You seem to be drawing quite the audience, Constance,” he whispered to her.

“Me? I’m not the one leading us further and further away from the breakfast.” She was aware where they were heading now.

“Well, I am tired of an audience. Come this way.” He drew her between the wisteria bushes that climbed the walls. They headed through a small black gate, aiming for a part of the garden that was much more secluded.

“Thomas . . .” she began carefully.

“Yes?” he asked, a look of innocence on his face.

“You know as well as I that we have no chaperone out here.” She gestured to the part of the garden they had now stumbled upon.

“We are hardly far away. If you wanted to, you could call for someone’s help to rescue you from my conversation,” he said with a tease.

“Well, I don’t find your conversation that dull yet.” At her words, he laughed heartily.

“I am pleased to hear it.” He turned the two of them again. “This way.” They walked between bushes, down a narrow chalk pathway.

“This garden is quite spectacular,” Constance mused, distracted for a minute.

“You see now why it is so easy to be jealous of Antony,” Thomas spoke up. “But today, I have to thank Antony for a great many things.”

“Such as?” she asked, looking back at him.

“Such as this.” He walked her out of the pathway. The bushes had fallen away, giving way to an enclosed platform in the garden, bordered with dark red roses. On top of it was a bench, and all the way around the bench and down the steps that led to the platform were strings of rose petals.

“What have you been plotting?” she asked with a smile as she looked at the rose petals that led up the path.

“Antony is a romantic. One suggestion and he took up the mantle only too gladly,” Thomas explained as they walked arm in arm up to the bench on the platform.

Constance could feel it coming. There had to be a reason for all of this pageantry, didn’t there? Her skin prickled with goosebumps at the very idea, so excited was she by it that when he urged her to sit on the bench, she struggled to stay still up on it.

“Care to explain your ulterior motive, yet?” she asked as he stood in front of her.

“Have you not guessed it?” he asked, smiling just as widely as she was.

“Perhaps.” She shrugged, teasing him further. He laughed warmly at her.

“Well then, here it goes.” He began to get down on one knee.

“Here it goes?” she repeated. “That is what you’re going to start with?”

“What do you want me to say?” He was still smiling.

“Something a little more romantic,” she teased again.

“Very well, love. Here.” He offered her his hand, and she took it quickly. “Neither of us can say we had the easiest of courtships. We had one or two bumps in the road.”

“Is that literally referring to the carriage accident?” she asked, her lips parted.

“Good pun, don’t you think?” he asked.

“I suppose so.” She nodded. “Continue.”

“From our first promenade together, it has been quite clear to me that not only are you one of the most beautiful women I have ever met.” He held tighter to her hand. Suddenly all humor had gone. What

replaced it was something tender and incredibly intimate. “You are also my best friend. You and I can talk together in a way I can talk with no other. These last few months I have fallen hopelessly, irrevocably in love with you, and nothing would make me happier than if you agreed to marry me. So, will you marry me, love?” he asked, his lips parted in wonder as he waited.

Constance felt her breath shudder, so keen was she to answer that she did not know what to say first. Instead, she acted.

She reached forward, leaning toward him off the bench and meeting his lips with her own. The kiss was brief at first, just a quick kiss, until Thomas reached up and softly caressed her neck, drawing her into him, just to maintain that kiss a little longer.

When they parted, his smile was as ridiculous as hers felt.

“Is that a yes?” he asked.

“Of course it is!” She laughed and threw her arms around him.

He chuckled too as they sat together for many minutes, just holding onto each other. Constance was quite certain it was the most memorable day of her life. Not only had her sister wed the man of her dreams, but now Constance had agreed to marry the man of hers.

Epilogue

Constance

Two months later

"What do you think?" Constance asked just as Viola walked into the room. She turned away from the mirror, looking at her sister, who teared up instantly, her smile wide as her lip trembled.

"Pretty as a picture," Viola said their old line, prompting Constance to giggle and turn back to the mirror. She had liked Viola's choices so much when she married, that she had opted for a very similar gown. This one was cream, and though it bore the same capped sleeves and long gloves, hers was beaded with tiny pearls, all the way along the neckline and along the hem of the train.
"Constance, here, I have something for you."

Constance turned back with surprise to see Viola outstretching her hands toward her. In her grasp was a tiny little box, inlaid with a golden trim, the white suede material soft to the touch.

"What is it?" Constance asked, unable to keep the excitement out of her voice.

“Open it.” Viola pressed the box firmly into her hands. “And best be quick about it. Our mother has not stopped rabbiting since I arrived. She will soon be up here dragging you out to the carriage, and I want a minute alone with you first.”

Constance did as her sister bid and opened the box. Inside were two pearl earrings, a perfect match for her dress and her necklace.

“Viola, they are beautiful.” Constance smiled. “But you didn’t have to get me a gift.”

“I wanted to.” Viola took her free hand in hers, lacing their fingers together. “I want you to know something.” She smiled as she spoke. “About what happened.”

“Let us not talk of it anymore.” Constance shook her head. She had heard Viola apologize for the past more times than she could count. She had already forgiven Viola for her part. She had forgiven her the day of the carriage accident, for it was there that she had seen just how in love Viola was with Antony and that she truly meant no ill

will. Constance had often wondered whether, if their roles had been reversed, she would have been manipulated by the Marquess of Devonshire in just the same way. The truth was . . . she rather suspected she would have been. That meant that she could never lay blame at her sister's door. One error did not counteract a lifetime of kindness and love. "You have already apologized enough, Viola."

"Then this will be the last time, if you insist." Viola squeezed her hand. "I want you to know that my jealousy of you was never born of any resentment towards you. I love you too much for that."

"Oh, Viola." Constance stepped closer to her sister, feeling her own tears begin to sting. She couldn't cry now, or she'd ruin her powder on her cheeks.

"I just wanted a little of what you had, Constance." Viola shrugged, almost helplessly. "That is the simplest way I can explain it."

"I know." Constance smiled. "I would have done the same, I am sure of it." She nodded eagerly. "Oh, we can't carry on like this, or I

will have to redo my whole beauty routine!" The two of them laughed warmly together.

"I just want you to know, Constance, how happy I am for you." Viola smiled, and it was genuine; Constance could see it. "I have never seen you as happy as when you are in Thomas' company. And I am immensely proud of the woman you have become."

"Oh, there we go!" Constance laughed as one tear escaped her eye. "You've done it now."

"Oh, I'm sorry." Viola fished for a handkerchief in the green gown she was wearing and mopped up Constance's tear. "There, all better."

"Tell me one thing," Constance said, pulling out the pearl earrings and hurrying to fasten them.

"Of course," Viola urged her on.

"Is being married very different from courtship?" Constance was

incredibly excited about marrying Thomas, but she was happy to accept that she was nervous, too.

"Yes," Viola said quickly. "Why? Does that make you sad?"

"It doesn't." Constance hurried to shake her head. "It's just . . . everything feels so right between Thomas and I at the moment. I'm nervous."

"There's no need to be." Viola took her hand again and gave it a gentle squeeze. "Yes, it's different from courtship, but it is also . . ." She paused and found a new smile, one that showed just how happy Viola was. "Infinitely better. In every regard."

"You do seem happy." Constance gestured to her smile.

"I am, and for that I have you to thank." Viola began to tow her toward the door.

"Me? Whatever for?" Constance asked.

“If it hadn’t been for you and Thomas, I might never have met my Antony. So, I am eternally grateful!” Viola and Constance giggled together as they left the room.

As the church door opened and Constance walked down the aisle on the arm of her father, she had to stop herself from running down it to reach Thomas quickly; she was so filled with excitement. At the far end of the aisle, Thomas stood in a stunning blue suit, with a rich midnight-colored waistcoat that complemented the color of his eyes beautifully.

The entire walk, she could barely look at the intimate congregation that had gathered to see them wed. They had invited their family and just a few friends, neither of them wanting a particularly grand affair. Only part way through the ceremony, when hymns were being sung, did Constance let her eyes wander.

She found Antony and Viola sat close together, hand in hand in one of the nearest pews. Viola looked a little pale. Then she placed the back of her hand to her mouth and stopped singing for a moment. It was an odd movement, one that made Constance watch her closely.

Antony whispered something in her ear, holding tightly to her hand. Viola nodded and eventually lowered her hand, though her paleness did not pass.

Is Viola . . . ill?

The momentary fear that overtook Constance was soon swept away as she and Thomas said their vows. Within moments, all thoughts of Viola were forgotten as Constance pledged herself to love Thomas forever.

"You may kiss the bride!" As the vicar declared the words, a hearty cheer went up from their small congregation.

Constance laughed at the loud sound so few people could make, but her laugh was quickly stifled as Thomas leaned toward her. They had stolen a couple of kisses in their courtship, away from the beady eyes of chaperones, but none quite matched up to this. For this kiss was a celebration.

When Thomas' lips left hers, Constance let out the tiniest

whimper.

"Fear not, love," he whispered in her ear. "We have the rest of our lives to share such moments."

How right he was!

As he led her out of the church, Constance looked around at the happy faces. Her mother was beside herself with excitement, and Archibald had just resolved himself to laughing at Jane's antics. Thomas' parents were just as overcome, with Thomas' mother shedding a tear or two. Antony and Viola were excited too, clapping perhaps more loudly than anyone else.

As Constance passed Viola, she turned back to see her sister. Viola was mid-sentence, saying something to Antony with a great smile on her cheeks when that paleness returned, and her face fell slack. Antony's arm came up around her, supporting her.

What is happening?

“Well, this can’t be good,” Thomas said at Constance’s side at the table. They were sitting at their wedding breakfast surrounded by friends and family. It was being held in Constance’s father’s house, and the tables dominated the large dining room.

“What can’t?” Constance looked back at Thomas, startled by his words.

“Well, we have barely been married . . .” He retrieved his pocket watch. “Two hours, and already I have somehow made you frown,” he teased.

“*You* have not made me frown.” She leaned toward him and placed a hand reassuringly over his. He slipped his fingers quickly between her own, binding the two of them together. The move was so intimate that she almost forgot what she was going to say. “I am merely concerned for someone, that is all.”

“Who?” Thomas asked.

“Viola.”

“Viola?” Thomas’ head darted round, searching for Viola among the guests. She wasn’t there, but Antony was. “Where is she?”

“That is my point,” Constance said nervously, her gaze keenly on Antony, who kept looking back at the door through which Viola had disappeared a few minutes ago, his knee shaking up and down. “I fear she is unwell.”

“Then, let’s go find out,” Thomas said. With their hands clutched together, he drew her to her feet, and they walked around the room, heading for Antony. It struck Constance as they walked together how this was to be their life now. Together, hand in hand, forever. She felt jittery with excitement at the idea.

“Antony?” Thomas said as they took two empty seats beside him. He flicked his head in their direction, away from the door. “My new wife is concerned for her sister.”

“Concerned?” Antony repeated, trying to affect a look of innocence. “Whatever for?”

“He’s hiding something.” Thomas leaned toward her, whispering conspiratorially, though in fact he was actually speaking quite loudly, so that Antony could hear him.

“Am I so easy to read?” Antony asked, rolling his eyes.

“Only for someone who has known you for as many years as I have,” Thomas said cheerfully. “Though I suppose we’re brothers now, too.”

“What is wrong with my sister, Antony?” Constance pleaded, leaning forward. “She has looked so pale for most of the morning! Should we be concerned?”

“No . . . it is a passing illness.” Antony looked as though he were struggling for words.

“Then what is it?” Constance demanded to know, folding her arms.

“It is nothing.” Antony shrugged.

“You realize we’re not letting you leave today until you tell us,” Thomas pointed out.

“Oh, I like that idea,” Constance spoke up. “I agree! You and Viola will be kept here until you reveal all.” To their words and matching stances of folding their arms and sitting bolt straight in their seats, Antony chuckled.

“You two already look quite the old married couple.” Antony gestured to the two of them.

“Antony,” Constance pleaded, “what is wrong with my sister?”

“There is nothing wrong,” Antony said softly, shaking his head. “We just didn’t want to speak of it today.”

“You have no choice now, speak of it,” Constance pleaded again, just as the door opened.

As Viola slipped in, Antony was on his feet, reaching toward her. She was even paler than before as she took his hand. Constance watched with admiration as Viola and Antony smiled at one another.

Antony whispered something to Viola, so quietly that Constance and Thomas couldn't hear.

"What do you reckon they're talking about?" Thomas asked, leaning toward her.

"Hmm . . ." She paused in thought, watching as Antony gestured with their clasped hands toward Viola's stomach. Suddenly, things clicked into place. The way Viola was so pale, how she had placed a hand to her lips as though to hold off nausea, the uneaten plate of food on the table and the gesture to her stomach.

"I don't believe it." Constance scrambled to her feet, walking quickly toward Viola. "You're with child?" she asked, a little too loudly.

She could hear people around them falling quiet, all heads

turned in their direction.

Viola's paleness was suddenly overtaken by a blush and her eyes widened.

"Say it louder, I don't think the cook all the way in the kitchen heard you," Viola pointed out.

"That means you are, though, doesn't it?" Constance asked, looking between Viola and Antony, who were now staring at one another.

"Oh well." Antony sighed. "There goes trying to keep it a secret until after their wedding day."

"Yes, Constance, I am with child." Viola smiled at her.

"Ah!" Constance practically squealed in excitement and threw her arms around her sister, clutching her very tightly indeed. "I'm going to be an aunt!"

"That's only if you release me and let me breathe again!"

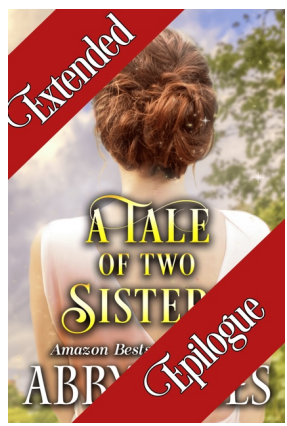
Viola laughed.

The Extended Epilogue

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Stealing away the Governess- Preview

Prologue

Susan

Three Years Ago

"Now, Liam, Arnold, who can tell me what planet this is?"

Two identical pairs of brown eyes narrowed in concentration as they focused on the large, illustrated chart Miss Susan Langdon was holding up for them, her finger pointing to the large red circle near the paper's center. She knew it was likely a difficult question for the five-year-old boys, but they were fascinated by stars and planets, and she wanted to indulge that innocent curiosity.

After several moments of furious thinking, Arnold's hand shot up.

"Yes, Arnold?"

"Mars?"

Susan smiled. "Yes, excellent. Well done."

The little boy beamed with pride. His brother gave a little pout.

“I was going to say that too,” he insisted.

Susan’s smile softened, an all too familiar feeling of tenderness pouring from her heart.

“I’ve no doubt you were,” she agreed. “You two are quite brilliant. I’m proud of you both.”

Liam’s smile widened to match his brother’s.

“Thank you, Miss Langdon!” he grinned.

She chuckled. “You’re very welcome.”

Susan loved her position as governess in the household of the Baron of Winthrop. She had been with the family since the twins’ birth and adored the two children as if they were her own. She also enjoyed working for her employers, Lord and Lady Winthrop.

They had given her more than just employment when they'd taken her on. They'd given her independence and a future that wasn't dependent on her marrying well, something she'd given up hope of doing long ago.

"Miss Langdon, when will father be home?" Arnold suddenly asked, his little boy mind jumping to a new topic without missing a beat.

"I'm not sure," she replied. "It will likely be at least a week, I would imagine."

Both boys frowned, concern etched on their little brows.

"That's too long," Liam whined.

"Why does he have to be gone for so long," Arnold grumbled.

"Now, now, none of that," Susan gently scolded. "There's no reason to complain. Your uncle needs your father just now, and—"

Suddenly, the door to the nursery opened, interrupting Susan. She glanced over to see her employer and close friend Harriet Johnson, Baroness Winthrop, cross the threshold. The lady smiled at her two sons, who both jumped up to run to her and hug her legs in glee.

“How are you, my darlings?” she asked, ruffling the hair on both their heads.

“We have been learning about the planets, Mama!” Arnold declared.

“Miss Langdon said Papa will be gone a whole week!” Liam pouted.

“I have just received a letter from your papa,” Lady Winthrop told them.

“Oh? Did Lord Winthrop arrive safely?” Susan asked, standing from her chair, and rolling the chart of planets up into a tight tube.

Harriet extricated herself from her boys and crossed the room to Susan.

“He did. He got there in good time for the duchess’ funeral.”

Susan felt a stab of sympathy shoot through her. She had never met Joseph’s elder brother, the Duke of Kent, or his wife, but she couldn’t imagine the pain His Grace must be going through. A heavy sigh escaped her lips, her heart breaking for a man whom she’d never met.

Liam and Arnold wandered up to their mother, and each grabbed one of her hands. Little Liam shook Harriet’s arm.

“Mama, what will happen to my cousins now that their mama has gone away?”

Susan and Harriet’s gazes met. For a moment, Susan could see a small spark of panic in the lady’s eyes. She realized Harriet likely didn’t know how to answer the question.

How easily I forget how she must be going through some amount of pain as well. The duchess was her sister-in-law.

"I suppose they shall have to rely on their father now," Susan quickly said, hoping to give Harriet a chance to collect herself. "They may need to employ a governess as well, if they haven't got one already."

"A governess would be nice for them," Arnold said with a somber nod. "You are a very good governess, Miss Langdon. If my cousins get a governess like you, they will be lucky, just like we are."

Susan smiled softly. "I am the lucky one, to be able to live here and spend my days with you boys."

The twins grinned up at her, still holding their mother's hands, and she couldn't help but think of their poor cousins, who would never hold their own mother's hands again. Two little boys, just a few months older than the twins, and two girls.

Liam suddenly gazed up at his mother.

“Mama, are you going to leave us like our aunt has left our cousins?”

Susan watched Harriet’s expression flicker with agony, but she managed to maintain her gentle smile for the sake of her boys. She lowered herself, so she was squatting between them. It wasn’t a ladylike position by any means but a very motherly one.

“Now, my darlings, you listen very closely to me, all right?” She gathered both her boys in front of her and squeezed their hands in hers. “I will never leave you. Even if it seems that I’m not here, right beside you, I promise that I will be.”

Both boys nodded. Arnold glanced over his shoulder to gaze up at Susan.

“We’re going to keep both of you forever,” he stated. “Mama and Miss Langdon. Aren’t we, Liam?”

Liam nodded firmly. “Yes, we’ll make sure we always have you both with us.”

Overwhelmed by their clear adoration, Susan lowered herself down to their level as well, though it was not a comfortable position, given her weak leg. She gritted her teeth against the ache that immediately began to throb in her calf and work its way up to her hip. Forcing a smile, she opened her arms to the boys.

“Come here, both of you.”

The boys moved from their mother and dove into Susan’s arms, hugging her tight as she held them against her. She looked over their heads to meet Harriett’s gaze again. Her expression was soft and tinged with sadness.

Neither needed to speak a word to know what the other was thinking. The boys needed and clung to Susan . . . for the time being. However, it wasn’t a governess’ place to stay with the children forever.

One day, they would grow up. They would start attending school. They wouldn't need her anymore.

One day, not so far in the future, her boys would move on with their lives, becoming men . . . and leaving her behind in the process.

Chapter 1

Eldridge – Present Day

"Are you all quite happy with yourselves?"

Four pairs of eyes glanced between each other and back to him. None held even a scintilla of remorse. Eldridge Johnson, the Duke of Kent, folded his arms over his chest and glared down at his four children, exasperation making his head pound.

"Someone had best give me an explanation as to how this happened. Now!" he growled.

His two boys, Theodore and Paul, pretended to be chastised and lowered their gazes, but he could see they were both struggling to keep a straight face. The youngest of the brood, little Lily, looked oblivious as to why she was even there. Anna, his eldest, looked downright defiant as she met his gaze with her chin held high.

All four remained silent, though, presenting a wall of solidarity

that seemed, more often than not, to be set against him. It was both impressive and infuriating how staunchly loyal to one another his children were.

Eldridge released a sigh of frustration. “Lady Clayton did not deserve such treatment from you. She has been nothing less than kind and patient with all of you and would have fit well into our household.”

Theodore let out a stray chuckle and Paul elbowed him sharply in the ribs. Eldridge rolled his eyes at their antics. Lady Clayton was a well-off lady of good breeding, who would have made a fine match for him, both in rank and wealth. She also acted as a mother-like figure for his rambunctious offspring. But unfortunately, she had become the latest victim of his children’s pranks and been chased off.

She was the fourth lady in six months to meet such a fate.

Eldridge looked from the boys, whom he knew better than to rely on for any sense of logic and thoughtfulness, and let his gaze settle on his firstborn.

“I expect better from you, Anna,” he scolded. “You are nearly a young lady, and well past the nursery and such childish endeavors.”

As stubborn as he, Anna didn’t appear at all concerned by his censure. She merely shrugged, her expression of defiance unchanging.

“I won’t allow some outsider to come here and replace Mother,” she stated matter-of-factly. “No matter how noble or wealthy she may be.”

Of course, that was the crux of their problem. Of all their problems, really. It had been three years since his wife Elizabeth had passed away, and yet the pain of her loss still radiated throughout the household.

Eldridge sighed, wishing Elizabeth were there with them. He often had that wish, but more especially when his children were proving too difficult for him to handle. Elizabeth had always been better at reigning them in than he.

She'd had infinitely more patience than him and was able to be both tender and stern when needed. Eldridge loved his children fiercely and would die to protect them, but sometimes . . . sometimes they just proved too overwhelming. He was out of his depth when it came to their care, especially with Anna, whom he believed needed a mother's influence, given how close she was to becoming a young lady and entering society.

It was obvious by just looking at the small horde that he wasn't going to get a lick of regret out of any of them. None of them were sorry, and they likely never would be. He wasn't sure what to do with them, or what else he could say that would make them understand his frustration.

"Go to your rooms," he ordered, reaching up to pinch the bridge of his nose. He could feel a headache forming behind his eyes. "I must think of a fitting punishment. Now, off with you."

They didn't hesitate for a moment, nearly tripping over each other to get away from him and dash out through the study door. He heard their giggles from the hallway as they hurried away, obeying

him by going to their rooms but defying him in their merriment.

Releasing a weary sigh, Eldridge made his way toward his desk and slumped down in his chair. What in the world was he going to do? His children were practically running circles around him, and he didn't know how to get the upper hand with them.

Well, next year the boys will be starting school at Eton. That will even the playing field just a little.

Still, he needed to figure something out for the girls. The boys would be away at school, but the girls would still be at home and in need of someone to teach them how to be proper young ladies. He had hoped to be able to find a wife to take on those responsibilities, but that was proving a near impossible task, as his children continued to scare away any potential matches.

Perhaps hiring a governess would be my best option?

They'd had a governess before. She'd been a pleasant old woman with a tender smile and a firm hand to guide and correct the children

when they stepped out of line. She'd retired nearly a year-and-a-half ago, and he'd just never gotten around to replacing her.

Perhaps now was the time, though. His children needed someone who could give them their sole attention. As much as he wished he could give them more of his time, his duties as duke were demanding, and he couldn't simply put them off or ignore them.

Where to begin looking, though? He imagined it would take a very special kind of woman to put up with his brood. Not just any governess would do.

Suddenly, he remembered his brother Joseph had often sung the praises of his children's governess. She was apparently a lady of significant education and poise, having grown up around nobility. She was somehow able to keep Joseph's twins in line, although they could be as rambunctious and wild as his own children.

Joseph's twins will be off to school within the year as well, I believe. Their governess will have no one to care for once they're gone.

Though both brothers had been blessed, if that was the correct word, with twins—Joseph's were identical, but Eldridge's were not—Joseph and his wife had not yet had any girls.

It could prove quite a simple matter to snatch their governess away when they no longer had a use for her.

An idea began to form in Eldridge's mind. Some might call it underhand, but he preferred to think of it as resourceful. Taking up pen and paper, he began to scribble out a brief letter to his younger brother, informing Joseph he would be visiting his family very soon.

To get the measure of the woman in question and determine if she's really worth snatching away.

He didn't feel any guilt as he finished the letter and prepared it for the post. This was the way it always been between himself and his brothers; though they were loyal to a fault, ready to face any threat or answer any insult as a united front, when it came to their inner workings, they could be ruthless.

If one brother possessed something another might want, the second brother had no qualms in scheming to take it. It was a trait he desperately hoped his children would never develop, as he could only imagine the misery he would suffer should the four start squabbling with each other as he and his brothers had while growing up.

Still, this time he was plotting against his brother *for* his children's sake. It was a noble cause and one he felt was quite justified, given the circumstances. In fact, the more he thought about it, the more selfish it seemed for Joseph *not* to give up his governess to Eldridge.

Eldridge was at his wit's end. He was desperate for help with his children, but his pride wouldn't allow him to voice such vulnerability to anyone, not even his brother. He had to do something, however, even if it meant stealing said help right from under Joseph's nose.

Smirking, he summoned his butler to take the letter to the post, then he sat back in his chair and gazed out of the window, feeling very sly and clever. He was eager, now, to visit his brother and meet the woman in question. With any luck, he might convince her that

working for him was a much more fortuitous opportunity than staying with his brother.

I wish I could say I'm sorry, Joseph, but desperate times call for even more desperate measures.

Now, he merely had to hope that this governess was really all his brother had made her out to be. If she was, she may very well be the answer to all his unspoken prayers.

Chapter 2

Susan

"Mama! Arnold dusted my face instead of the cupboard!"

"I did not! Your face got in the way! It wasn't on purpose!"

"It was so!"

"Was not!"

"Was so!"

"For the love of all that is holy, if you two little beasties don't stop arguing right this instant, I will throw you both in the kennel with the dogs!"

"I want to sleep with the dogs!"

"Me too!"

Susan walked through the door of the house just as the twins took off with matching screams, before dissolving into wild barks as they ran from room to room like rabid animals. Eyes wide with surprise, she met Harriett's gaze; she was standing outside the parlor door, looking exhausted and frazzled. She nearly broke out into tears when she saw Susan.

"Oh! Thank the Lord you're back!" She rushed forward and threw her arms around Susan in a tight hug. "These little monsters are going to drive me mad; I swear they are!"

In the eight years that Susan had been governess for Lord and Lady Winthrop, she had never seen her friend and employer so careworn. Harriet was wearing an apron and had her sleeves rolled up, looking more like a maid than a baroness.

"What in the world is going on?" Susan asked, as Harriet released her from her hold and took a step back. "I leave you for a week, and I return to find the house has nearly collapsed without me!"

Harriet released a slightly crazed laugh. “You could say that, yes. We had an unexpected letter arrive the other day which has thrown us into utter chaos.”

“Who was it from?” Susan frowned. *Who could have written, and what about, to cause so much fuss?*

“Joseph’s brother,” Harriet sighed. “He wrote to tell us he is coming to visit us. The maids are working around the clock, and I have been trying to lend a hand to prepare the house for the duke’s arrival. But foolishly, I tried to get the twins to help too. Of course, they were of no help at all and have only gone wild, making it so much more difficult to get anything done at all.”

“I see,” Susan nodded. She glanced around, noting a few maids popping in and out of rooms with cleaning supplies and arms full of linens. The boys could still be heard barking and shrieking, their footsteps pounding across the floor somewhere in the house as they chased each other, completely oblivious to the tension filling the household around them.

It was truly a chaotic scene to behold, and Susan turned back to her friend with a sympathetic gaze.

Once upon a time, I created chaos . . . now, I help to fix it.

"All will be well," she assured Harriet. "Why don't you go into the parlor and rest for a moment? I'll take care of the boys, and then I'll join you."

Harriet nodded before shuffling off to follow Susan's suggestion. Releasing a heavy sigh, Susan turned her attention from the lady to the two boys running wildly through the house. She swiftly walked down the hallway, following the sounds of their mayhem, and discovered them running in literal circles in the library.

Liam was chasing Arnold, barking like a dog still, and Arnold was laughing like a madman as he avoided getting caught.

"What is going on here?" Susan demanded in a sharp voice. The boys came to an instant halt and looked at her with wide eyes. Susan was not the type of governess to shout at her charges, but when her

voice took on a certain firm note, they knew she was not to be crossed.

"We were just playing, Miss Langdon," Arnold tried to explain in a soft voice.

Susan folded her arms over her chest and arched her brow at them. "Playing? It does not sound to me as though you are playing but instead carrying on like little savages. You have nearly driven your poor mother mad with your tomfoolery. Is that what you want? To upset your mother?"

Both boys dropped their heads and looked properly ashamed of themselves.

"No, Miss Langdon," they said in unison.

She nodded, satisfied they were well chastised.

"That's good." She moved closer to them and bent over with her hands on her knees to bring her line of sight closer to theirs. "Now, do

you want to help your mother, so that she doesn't actually go mad?"

They both glanced up at her and nodded timidly.

She smiled. "That's my good boys. Now, let's make a little game of it, yes?"

Their eyes lit up with interest.

"What kind of game?" Liam inquired.

"Let's have a race. I want you boys to go around the house as fast as you can and pick up any toys or belongings of yours that belong in your room. Whoever collects the most in the shortest time and puts everything away neatly will get a treat."

Now, their expressions became eager.

"What kind of treat?" Arnold gasped.

Susan made a show of thinking about the question very hard.

“What if we had Cook make a custard tart for the winner?”

Both boys let out squeals of delight, as custard tarts were among their favorite desserts.

“I’m going to win!” Arnold declared.

“No, I’m going to win!” Liam insisted.

They glared at one another, and Susan realized she needed to add another rule to keep their competitive natures from getting out of hand.

“Now, there will be no fighting or arguing,” she firmly stated. “If there is, neither of you shall get the tart. Understood?”

The boys jerked their gazes away from each other, clearly taking her threat seriously. They both nodded eagerly.

“We understand, Miss Langdon,” Liam assured her.

“We promise, no fighting,” Arnold added.

Susan grinned and stood up straight once more. “Very good. All right, when I say go, the race begins. Ready. Set. Go!”

The boys shot off in an instant, both eager to win the coveted prize she’d dangled before them.

I’ll need to let the cook know we shall need a couple of tarts . . . though the winner’s will have to be slightly bigger, so he doesn’t feel slighted.

When she heard the boys laughing as they raced to pick up their things, she shook her head with a chuckle. Turning, she made her way back out of the library and wandered down to the parlor to find Harriet. When she reached the room, she found her friend slightly slumped in a chair by the fireplace, a dazed look on her face.

“My lady?” Susan said as she cautiously approached. “Are you alright?”

The lady blinked and met Susan's gaze. "How in the world do women raise children without help?"

Laughing, Susan settled into the chair across from her friend. "I don't think many women do. They might not all be able to afford to pay for help, but they have some assistance, whether it be family or friends. For those that are purely on their own, I heartily salute them."

Harriet nodded. "Indeed. I cannot tell you how invaluable you are to this household, Susan. Without you, I'm sure we would fall apart at the seams."

"That's not true, my lady," Susan insisted. "You would manage perfectly well, I'm sure."

Harriet gave her a pointed look. "It's just the two of us, dear. I insist you call me Harriet."

Susan sighed. "Oh, very well . . . Harriet."

It was a tiny, ongoing argument they'd been having almost since

Susan's arrival at the Winthrop house. Though they might count themselves as the best of friends, Susan still felt it improper to call Harriet anything but Lady Winthrop, as she was not only providing Susan's wages, but held a station far above her own. Harriet, on the other hand, believed just the opposite, and would have had Susan calling her by her given name in all situations every day if she had her way.

Susan, however, was nearly as stubborn as Harriet, and so they had reached a compromise. Around others, Susan would refer to Harriet as Lady Winthrop. When they were alone, no titles would exist between them.

"If you're not going to honor the terms of our agreement, why do we even have it?" Harriet groused.

"I only agreed to it because you would not stop nagging me to call you by your first name," Susan grumbled. "But I suppose that's neither here nor there at present. You say the house needs preparing for the arrival of Lord Winthrop's brother. Why all the fuss?"

Harriet tilted her head back against her seat and hissed to the ceiling. “That’s just what happens when a duke decides to come and stay with you.”

Susan’s jaw dropped. The duke? His eldest brother, then?

She had assumed the brother coming to visit was Lord Winthrop’s younger one, Mr. Johnson. Susan had met him a few times previously, but she’d never met the eldest of the Johnson brothers.

The widower.

Her heart ached a little bit at the thought. It had been three years since the duchess’ passing, but Susan couldn’t imagine such a loss ever became easier to bear. She knew what it was like to lose a parent, having lost both of hers to fever when she was young, but she had no idea what it was like to lose a spouse.

To lose the person you loved above all others.

“He’s also bringing all the children,” Harriet added, slapping her

hand against her forehead. “Mind you, I love my nieces and nephews dearly, but that’ll be six children running rampant in this house. I don’t know that we’ll be able to survive it.”

Susan chuckled. “You’ve nothing to fear. I’ll help with the children, naturally, and I’ll also help you organize things, so the house is ready for their arrival. When are they arriving, by the way?”

Harriet leveled her with a look of despair.

“Tomorrow.”

Susan blinked, some of her friend’s panic immediately setting into her own thoughts.

“Tomorrow?” she gasped. “You cannot be serious!”

Harriet nodded, then threw her hands over her eyes with a groan. “Why do they do these things to me? Just because he’s a duke, he thinks he can just descend upon us with such little notice whenever he chooses. I should wring his neck when he gets here!”

Susan stood and moved closer to Harriet, so she could wrap her fingers around her wrists and gently pull them away from her face. She gave her friend a reassuring smile, hiding her own misgivings about having to be ready for the visit in less than a day.

“Worrying is not going to help us,” she said. “Also, murdering your brother-in-law in front of his children would likely not be advisable.”

“I’d wait until they were all out in the garden with the boys,” Harriet murmured. “I’m not a monster.”

Susan couldn’t help the chuckle that slipped past her lips. “I know you’re not, Harriet. Now, up you get. We have much to do and very little time to do it. The boys are picking up their belongings from around the house as we speak. What else has been done? Have rooms been prepared?”

Sighing, Harriet allowed Susan to pull her from her chair and straighten out her apron.

“The duke’s room has been readied. His twins will stay with Arnold and Liam in their room, and the girls will have their own room. I’ve no idea if the rooms have been fully prepared yet or not. There is still the matter of approving Cook’s menu for the duration of their stay, and, since he’s a duke, certain social protocols must be met with the local magistrate . . .”

Harriet was beginning to ramble, her stress heightening with each word she spoke. Susan grabbed the woman’s hands and squeezed them gently. Harriet fell silent as she met Susan’s steadying gaze.

“Take a breath,” Susan ordered. “Now, we must take this one task at a time. I will go and make sure the girls’ room is ready, as well as the extra beds in the twins’ room. You can go down to the kitchen and sort out the menu with Cook. I shall also check with Mrs. Beyer to see if Cynthia and Bernice have the cleaning in hand throughout the house. Does that sound like a workable plan?”

Visibly calming, Harriet slowly nodded. “Yes, yes. That sounds like a very good plan. A very good plan indeed.”

“Very well,” Susan patted her friend’s hands affectionately, “then we shall get through this swimmingly, I believe. We simply need to take it one task at a time.”

Harriet released a deep breath. “You’re right. Of course, you’re right. Oh, Susan, I really mean it when I say I’d be lost without you. What are we going to do when the boys go to Eton? I don’t want . . . I don’t want to lose you.”

Susan gulped, emotion threatening to overwhelm her, but she forced it back. “It’ll be all right. Things will be fine. We’ll cross that bridge when we get to it. Until then, we have more pressing matters to worry about, wouldn’t you agree?”

Harriet looked as if she wished to say more on the matter, but she pressed her lips together and reluctantly stayed silent.

“All right, we’re not getting anything done standing here dawdling,” Susan declared, desperate to move away from the tricky topic of her position and the boys’ upcoming departure for school.

“Off you go to the kitchen.”

She released Harriet’s hands and made a show of shooing her away. Harriet hesitated only a moment, but then turned and made her way out of the parlor without a backwards glance.

When she was alone, Susan took a moment to calm her racing heart. She didn’t want to think about what would happen to her once she was no longer needed in the Winthrop household. She adored her life with the family, though she wasn’t without her regrets.

Before becoming their governess, she had made several mistakes which had all but guaranteed she’d never be able to have a family of her own. Harriet, the boys, and Lord Winthrop had become her world, and she hated the idea of leaving them.

She knew it was inevitable, however. The only way to stay in the household was to become a maid, but that was hardly a solution. She would have even lower status in the household, and it would be rather unconventional for her to maintain her close friendship with Harriet.

No, that wasn't a solution. She would need to find another position somewhere else. While starting over again with a new family was far from an appealing prospect, she knew it was necessary for her to continue to maintain her life and independence.

With a sigh, Susan gazed around the parlor, trying to commit to memory as many details of the room as she could. She didn't want to forget a single thing about her time in this house. Every second she still had left to her, she would cherish and hold onto as the special gift she knew them to be.

Taking in a deep breath, she pushed away the emotions threatening to overwhelm her. Now was not the time for such sentiments. There was much to do and no time at all in which to do it.

They would get through the duke's visit, and then she would allow herself to bemoan her inevitable departure from this place. In the meantime, she was still the governess of the house, and her employer was in desperate need of her services. She was not about to start letting Harriet down now, not when they were so close to the end.

Chapter 3

Eldridge

"Papa, why are we visiting Uncle Joseph and Aunt Harriet?"

Frowning, Eldridge glanced toward perceptive little Anna, who sat across the carriage from him, a serious expression on her face.

"What's the matter?" he asked. "Don't you want to see your cousins?"

She shrugged. "I suppose, but we're staying with them for so long. Isn't their house small? Will we all fit?"

"Their house isn't that small," he sighed with a shake of his head. "Our house is just uncommonly big. There will be plenty of room, don't you worry."

She appeared thoughtful for a long moment, and then said, "All right, I believe you. The house will fit us all. You haven't explained

why we're staying with them in the first place, though. Usually, they come to us."

"That's true," he conceded. "But I thought it would be a nice change for you and your siblings to get away from the manor for a bit and just enjoy yourselves with your cousins. Was I wrong to think so?"

Anna turned to look at her brothers, who were curled up on the bench next to her, fast asleep. Then, she turned her gaze to little Lily, who was snuggled against Eldridge's chest, snoring softly.

"I suppose a change of scenery would be good . . . for them," she hurriedly clarified. "Such considerations are not really necessary for me, as I'm hardly a child anymore."

When you speak like that, I almost believe you.

He forced a smile, not wishing her to see just how devastated he was by her quick leap into adulthood. It had been this way since her mother had passed, however. Little by little, Anna had taken on more and more of a serious demeanor, letting go of her childhood

enjoyments and fantasies.

It broke his heart in a way because he wasn't ready for her to grow up. However, he knew it was pointless to try and stop her. She was her mother's daughter through and through, the stubborn little thing.

Lily shifted in his lap, and he patted her back soothingly to keep her from waking up.

"Of course not," he replied to Anna, indulging her desire to be seen as a grownup, even though he doubted he could ever truly do so. "You won't be entertained by such pursuits as hide-and-seek and that treasure hunting game your cousins so enjoy playing. You'll be much more content sitting with your aunt in her sitting room, quietly sewing or reading poetry, or whatever it is proper young ladies do to keep themselves busy."

She made a face of distaste, having not yet mastered the ability to school her features and hide her true feelings. Clearing her throat, she resumed her serious expression and nodded.

“Yes . . . exactly. Those pursuits are much more suited to me than . . . than running around like a wild chicken.”

He arched his brow at that. “A wild chicken, eh? I suppose that would not be very becoming of a young lady at all.”

She shook her head firmly. “No. Not in the least.”

He sighed dramatically and looked down at Lily. “It’s a shame, though. Poor Lily.”

“What do you mean, poor Lily?”

He glanced back up at Anna. “Oh, it’s nothing. I simply mean . . . well, she’ll be quite outnumbered, won’t she? While you're busy with your womanly activities, she’ll be stuck playing with the four boys all by herself. I can’t imagine they’ll be very kind to her, as she’s the littlest *and* the only girl. I suppose she’ll just have to buck up, though. No point in getting upset about something she can’t change, is there?”

Anna blinked, then furrowed her brow in concern. “I . . . I hadn’t considered that. I don’t want Lily to be outnumbered . . .”

“But you’re far too old for such things as playing and fun, as you’ve said,” he continued in a mournful tone. “You shouldn’t be forced to belittle yourself. Not even for your sister’s sake. No, no, it’s best this way. One day she’ll grow out of her need to play, as you have, but until then, she’ll just have to make do with the four boys.”

“Papa, that won’t be necessary,” Anna quickly said. “I can join the children, if only to protect Lily, so she isn’t bullied by the boys. True, it’s not a very womanly thing for me to engage in, but it is my duty as her older sister. I’m afraid that must come first, in this case.”

“Only if you’re certain,” he replied, making his tone grave.

“I am,” she nodded.

He released a deep breath. “I’m sure your sister will appreciate the sacrifice you’re making for her. You are a most excellent sister, my dear.”

Anna beamed. “Thank you, Papa. I try my very best, you know.”

“I know,” he assured her with a smile of his own. When he was one-on-one like this with his children, he didn’t feel so overwhelmed. It wasn’t that he didn’t enjoy spending time with all his children together, but he was simply not at all skilled at managing all four children when they ran wild.

I pray this governess is as skilled as Joseph claims she is.

“Oh, Papa, look! We’re here!” Anna declared, pointing out of the carriage window.

He twisted in his seat, so he could glance outside as well, and, sure enough, they were entering the short drive to his brother’s modest country home.

“Wake your brothers, please,” he told Anna. She immediately went to work, shaking them both a little harder than was necessary.

Theodore and Paul both groaned and whined in protest at being so abruptly roused from sleep, but when Anna told them they'd reached their destination, they both sat straight up, wide-awake with excitement.

Eldridge considered waking Lily, but then thought better of it. His sweet baby was all angel-faced and loving when she was well-rested, but if her nap was cut short, she was terror incarnate.

By the time the carriage came to a stop, the boys were practically vibrating in their seats. When Eldridge glanced out of the window again, he spotted his brother and sister-in-law waiting in front of the house to greet them, along with their own twins, who appeared to be barely containing their excitement. There was someone else with them as well.

A young woman.

The governess?

As soon as the door was opened, the boys went crashing out onto

the drive, scrambling to get to their cousins. Anna stepped out of the carriage after them with a little more dignity, though she leapt from the doorway, bypassing the step altogether, so her skirts went flying. Still cradling Lily to his chest, Eldridge carefully made his way out after his older three, already feeling exhausted.

His boys rushed to their cousins, who looked equally as excited to see Theo and Paul. However, unlike his wild offspring, Arnold and Liam remained in place, though they did start bouncing on their heels eagerly. They glanced up at the woman standing beside them, their gazes pleading with her.

With a small smile, she nodded to them, and like dogs being let off their leashes, they shot off with their cousins. The four boys quickly disappeared around the side of the house, their collective laughter and hoots of joy fading slightly as they ran further away.

Eldridge shot the woman a look of surprise. How was it that she had such influence over his nephews that even in their overwhelming excitement to play with their cousins, they didn't move an inch without her permission?

That is quite promising.

Before he could think further on the matter, or the governess, his brother came hurrying toward him. Eldridge adjusted his daughter, so he could embrace his younger brother with one arm without disturbing her.

“It’s good to see you, brother,” Joseph declared in a hushed tone as he eyed the sleeping child. “We’re so happy to have you here with us.”

“Indeed,” Eldridge grinned and nodded. “It is good to be here. Your home is as lovely as ever.”

He gazed up at the house with a smile. It was, indeed, much smaller than his own, but, in truth, he actually preferred it. Eldridge would never admit it out loud, but he envied his brother his simpler lifestyle. Though he did not often mind the burdens of his title, the trappings often seemed to him trivial and unnecessary.

His brother's wife, Harriet, came up behind her husband, her own face bright with happiness at seeing them.

"Welcome, your Grace," she said, offering her cheek to him to kiss. "I trust your journey went well?"

"As well as can be expected with four hellions to keep hold of," he replied with a chuckle. "Though I'll admit the ride became much easier when three of them fell asleep."

"I see one still is." Harriet's gaze turned tender as she looked at Lily, still tucked in his arm.

He nodded. "I hated to wake her, as she can be a bit of a demon when she hasn't gotten her full rest."

"Would you like me to take her, Your Grace?" a soft voice asked from his side. "I can take her up to the room that's been prepared for her."

Eldridge turned and found the young woman smiling up at him.

She was not very tall, only coming up to his shoulder, and she had to tilt her head back to look at him. Her brown eyes were big, with rings of gold around her irises, and her dark red hair was held neatly back from her face by a braid which wound into a glossy crown atop her head.

Still, little wisps of hair escaped and framed her face, brushing against her pale cheeks with each movement she made.

As she continued to stare up at him, he realized he hadn't responded to her offer.

"Oh . . . uh . . . yes, that would be most helpful, thank you, Miss . . ."

Still, he hesitated to hand his daughter over to a perfect stranger.

Joseph, perhaps sensing his paternal worry, said, "Brother, this is Miss Susan Langdon, our governess. Believe me when I say Lily could not be in better hands than hers."

“It’s an honor to meet you, Your Grace,” Miss Langdon said, dropping into a low curtsy.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you as well, Miss Langdon,” he stammered, bowing awkwardly as he continued to juggle his daughter.

When she straightened and gazed up at him again, he was struck by how young she appeared. From the little he’d heard of her, he had expected a strict old woman, like a former schoolmistress. Instead, he was faced with this lovely woman, who looked to be in the prime of her youth.

How could someone like her be so capable of handling such rambunctious children as his nephews? What magic powers did she possess?

Joseph suddenly cleared his throat, snapping Eldridge from the daze he hadn’t realized he’d fallen into.

“All right there, old man?” his brother teased. “Miss Langdon

will take Lily and make sure she's well cared for. You have my word."

Eldridge glanced back down at the woman next to him, and her smile was so warm, her demeanor so welcoming, that he found himself handing his youngest to her without another moment's hesitation.

"She's heavier than she looks," he warned softly.

Miss Langdon carefully took Lily into her arms, holding the girl, so her cheek was pressed against her shoulder.

"Worry not, Your Grace," she whispered. "I'm stronger than I look."

He couldn't help the awed little smile that curled his lips, as she turned and began to walk back into the house. To his surprise, he noted a slight limp in her gait, but it didn't appear to slow her down at all. His curiosity only grew, as he wondered how a young woman of her apparent strength and health had come to walk in such a way.

Joseph suddenly slapped him on the shoulder, jerking him from his musings about the pretty governess.

“Come, Brother. Let’s go inside and get you settled. You must be tired after your journey here, and you should take advantage of a little peace while the children occupy themselves.”

Anna, who had been gazing at the house critically all this time, turned to him and said, “Really, Papa. I don’t see how we’ll all fit inside. It just doesn’t seem possible.”

Joseph released a deep belly laugh, as he reached down to pat Anna on her head as they passed by.

“Fear not, my dear. We’ve prepared our finest broom closet for you. You should be most comfortable in there.”

Eldridge snickered at his daughter’s horrified face.

“Oh, don’t listen to those scoundrels,” Harriet insisted, coming up beside Anna and placing a gentle hand on her shoulder. “We’ve

prepared a lovely room for you and your sister. It overlooks the garden. Miss Langdon has helped to make sure it is absolutely perfect, ready for your arrival."

"She has?" his daughter murmured, with a slight tinge of pink in her cheeks.

Harriet nodded. "Indeed, she has. Would you like to see it? We'll have to take care not to wake Lily, but I'll take you up there now if you would like."

Anna glanced toward Eldridge with a question in her eyes.

Smirking, he nodded, silently giving her permission to go upstairs with her aunt. She beamed, her excitement at seeing the bedroom rather endearing. When Harriet offered her hand, Anna took it without hesitation.

Eldridge felt a strange pain in chest at the sight of his daughter hand in hand with a woman who was about the same age his wife would have been had she survived. He knew Anna, sooner than the

others, was going to be the one in need of a mother the most. She was growing into a beautiful little lady, and he hadn't a clue what to do with her.

When she and Harriet disappeared down the hallway off the second-floor landing, Joseph wrapped his arm around Eldridge's shoulders.

"Shall we have a drink before you freshen up?"

Glancing toward Joseph gratefully, Eldridge let his brother lead him through the small house toward his study. Once inside, Joseph poured them each drink of brandy and they sat together in front of a large-paned window which looked out over a neighboring field.

Eldridge took a sip as he gazed at the view. "It certainly is lovely here, Joseph. I envy your home. It's so warm and comfortable. The manor often feels cold and empty. Even with the four children running around."

It's as if something's . . . missing.

Joseph gave him a sympathetic look. “You know, a wife would probably make the manor feel more like a home again.”

Eldridge gritted his teeth. “I’m well aware . . . but that’s a conversation for another day, I believe. For now, let’s just enjoy each other’s company and not worry about such things. It’s been too long, Brother, since I saw you last.”

Joseph nodded. “Indeed, it has. I am very glad to have you here, and so is Harriet. Though, I must confess, she wanted to wring your neck when you first informed us you were coming.”

Eldridge arched a brow in surprise. “Oh? Whatever for?”

Joseph chuckled. “Brother, you practically invited yourself to our home with your entire litter. Accommodating five guests in this house is no small thing. If it hadn’t been for Susan . . .”

“Miss Langdon?” Eldridge perked up with interest. “What about her?”

“She was able to keep my poor wife sane as the household prepared for your arrival. In all honesty, you should probably thank her for saving your neck, though I’m not yet convinced Harriet still wouldn’t like to have a go at you, just to watch you squirm.”

Eldridge chuckled. “Well, I’ll have to find some way to make it up to my poor sister-in-law . . . and thank Miss Langdon at the same time.”

Joseph nodded. “Indeed. It is usually in one’s best interest to get oneself into a favorable light with the ladies of this household if one wants any kind of peace. Otherwise . . . well, you don’t really want to know otherwise.”

Eldridge didn’t think his brother was joking. He took another sip, his mind scrambling to come up with some gesture to help him earn Harriet’s forgiveness. Yet, all he could seem to think of was Miss Langdon and what he could do to show his gratitude.

Besides offering her a larger sum than his brother to secure her

services.

He kept his thoughts to himself, of course, not wishing his brother to discern his true motivation for visiting. Instead, he let the conversation change to a safer topic, that of the political tensions currently at play in parliament. As the two continued to talk and bring the other up to date on the goings on in their lives, Eldridge relaxed and simply enjoyed his time with his brother.

There would be plenty of opportunity to put his plot into action later. Although, from the sounds of things, to prevent Harriet from hating him forever after he stole her precious governess, he was going to have placate her with something very big and extremely expensive.

Once he had finished his drink with his brother, Eldridge retreated to the room readied for him to freshen up and rest a little. As he rooted through his luggage to find a fresh shirt and jacket, his mind once more returned to Miss Langdon.

He was curious about her. How did a pretty young woman like her end up as a governess? Especially if she had familial ties to nobility, as he'd learned she did from Joseph.

And that limp . . . had she been in an accident? Did it still hurt her? It didn't seem to impede her ability to do her duties, which was a relief.

Joseph hadn't mentioned anything of the sort, but Eldridge was beginning to wonder if they had taken her on as a favor of sorts. That would certainly make convincing her to come away to work for him slightly trickier, as she would likely feel loyal to Joseph and Harriet. An admirable trait, no doubt, but one he would have to circumvent if he were to get what he wanted.

He considered the best way to approach her with his proposition, and thought he might ease into it. He didn't want to startle her with his offer, and he didn't want to alert his brother and sister-in-law while they still had influence over her to make her stay with them. He needed to come up with a very well-thought-out plan to secure her services before Joseph became the wiser.

Finding his shirt at last, Eldridge quickly changed out of the one he'd worn on the journey, which was soiled with sweat and road dust. As he yanked the fresh linen over his head, he moved toward a window in his room which overlooked the garden. He gazed out of it and tensed when he spotted Miss Langdon herself with his three oldest and Joseph's twins.

All five children were standing in a circle with her, and they were kicking a ball back and forth. Though he couldn't quite determine the point of the game, they did all seem to be having a splendid time. Including Anna, who was laughing and participating as thoroughly as the rest of them.

Miss Langdon, too, was smiling and laughing. She was much more cautious with her kicks than her young charges, no doubt because of her leg, but she was otherwise acting in as carefree a manner as a young girl herself. Except, when she spoke, all the children appeared to listen.

Including his.

He continued to watch for what stretched into long minutes, fascinated, and hardly able to believe she had gained so much control over his children so quickly.

She is perfect. I shall tuck her under my arm and run off with her if need be.

If he'd had any doubts upon seeing her and realizing her youth, those doubts were instantly banished. He was refortified in his determination to steal her for himself. In truth, he had no choice.

If he didn't soon find some sort of relief for the burdens not only he himself, but his children too, were carrying, he feared what might happen to his family. He would likely go mad . . . and his children might come to resent the inept parent who had been left to them.

Chapter 4

Anna

Staying with her uncle and aunt wasn't turning out to be quite the dreary experience she had expected it to be. In fact, had to admit she was rather enjoying herself, playing with her cousins and siblings every day. It wasn't very ladylike, she knew, but she felt as though she didn't have to quite be such a lady in this house.

Back home was another matter entirely. Home was a grand estate, the seat of her father's duchy. It wasn't a place for frolicking like a fool through the garden or running through the halls playing tag.

It was a dignified place, and she had come to realize she must be dignified when inside it.

At her aunt and uncle's home, though, that pressure seemed to have disappeared completely. She could tramp around barefoot, or lounge in the window seat of the library with a book propped against

her knees without fearing someone might notice her not sitting properly.

Her brothers and cousins were spread across the floor next to her seat, all gazing at books themselves. Lily sat at Anna's feet, playing with one of her dolls rather than holding a book, which was for the best, as she didn't know all her letters yet and would likely only get frustrated if she tried to read anything on her own.

It was a peaceful way to spend an afternoon, but Anna should have known it would be short-lived. When it came to the four boys spread out before her, nothing stayed peaceful for long.

"We have a plan," Liam suddenly announced, putting down his book and gazing around at each of them.

Anna frowned, but it was Theo who asked, "What plan?"

Liam exchanged a look with Arnold, who answered, "A plan to get Uncle Eldridge to marry Miss Langdon."

"*What*?" Anna and her brothers exclaimed nearly as one. Lily was far too preoccupied with her doll to pay any real attention to what was going on around her.

"They've been quite nice to each other the past few days," Liam explained. "And we want Miss Langdon to become part of the family, so she doesn't have to be sent away when we go to Eton."

Anna was shocked. "You can't force a woman on our father like that! He's our papa, not yours!"

"He likes her; we wouldn't be forcing him," Arnold insisted.

"You don't know what you're talking about!" Anna was growing angrier with each word her cousins spoke. "I'm nearly a lady, and so I know much more about these things than you."

"Oh, yes?" Liam frowned, irritation flickering across his face. "You think you're such a grown up? Well, you're *not*!"

Slamming her book shut, she moved to stand and braced her

hands on her hips to glare down at him.

"I'm much more grownup than you," she snapped. "And because I'm a lady, I know more about emotions and feelings than you do."

Arnold snorted. "That's silly. Boys know just as much about those things as girls. We have emotions and feelings too, dummy."

"That's not what I mean!" Anna just resisted the urge to stamp her foot in her frustration. "I'm talking about things like love and romance. You boys have no idea how any of that works.

"We don't?" Liam asked before exchanging a look with Arnold, who shrugged. "What don't we know?"

"How to tell when two people are in love, for one," she said, holding up a finger to emphasize her point. "If you had any sense in your heads, you would see that there are no actual feelings between papa and your governess. They are not going to get married."

"That's right," Paul piped up. "Besides, we've been working hard

to make sure papa never remarries."

Theo nodded. "That's true!"

Anna now folded her arms over her chest. "We don't want our papa to ever remarry, because we won't let anybody replace our mother."

"Miss Langdon wouldn't replace your mother," Arnold replied with a shrug. "She didn't replace our mother, but she's taken care of us and loved us almost like a mother. It's been wonderful having her."

"Which is why we don't want to lose her," Liam stated. "Which is why we think she should marry Uncle Eldridge."

Anna curled her hands into fists by her sides. She wanted to pummel her cousins for being little fools, but she knew she would just get into trouble for it . . . even if they did deserve it.

"There is no chance our papa will ever marry again," she growled. "He especially won't marry a governess. He's a duke, after

all. Were he to marry again, it would be to a noble lady."

"Or a princess!" Theo added.

Anna nodded in agreement. "Exactly. A princess. Our papa is an important man, and he would need to marry an important woman. Miss Langdon is nice, but she's not important."

Arnold and Liam's eyes went wide in nearly the same way.

"She *is* important!" Liam exclaimed. "She's very, very important! You don't know her, so you can't say that. You can't say she's not important."

"She'd be a much better wife than some silly princess," Arnold grumbled. "She knows all sorts of things and can take care of herself and anyone else she needs to. A princess couldn't do that."

Anna rolled her eyes in exasperation. "We're talking in circles! It doesn't matter if you think she'd be better than a princess, because my papa isn't marrying either one of them. He loves our mama too much.

He could never love anyone other than her."

"Want to bet on it?" Arnold challenged.

Anna furrowed her brow at him. "What do you mean?"

"Let's make a bet," he clarified. "Liam and I will bet that Miss Langdon will marry Uncle within the year."

"And we'll bet that it will never happen," Anna snapped, catching on. "What do we get when you lose?"

Arnold and Liam shared another glance.

"If you win, you'll get all the allowance money we've saved."

Anna's nostrils flared. "Very well, if that's what you want, I won't turn down the offer. If we win, we get your allowance money, and if you win, you get mine."

"Agreed!" Liam and Arnold said at once.

Just to be safe, Anna stuck out her hand for them each to shake, so they all knew it was serious. Once that was done, Anna stepped back and regarded her cousins with a stern expression.

"All right," she said in a firm voice. "The bet is set, the stakes are laid, and we've sealed it with a handshake. Now there's nothing left to do but wait for you two to be proven wrong."

Liam stuck his tongue out at her before saying, "We aren't wrong. You're wrong. You'll see. Uncle won't be able to resist Miss Langdon once he really gets to know her better."

Anna furrowed her brow, worry making her belly churn. She wasn't going to let that happen. Bet or not bet, she wouldn't sit back and let another woman swoop in and steal her father's heart from her mother.

She and her brothers had driven away with ease the high-class ladies and noblewomen who'd sought to be their father's wife. Compared to them, sending the governess running should prove no

challenge at all.

A Message from Abby

Dear Reader,

Thank you for reading! I hope you enjoyed every page and I would love to hear your thoughts whether it be a review online or you contact me via my website. I am eternally grateful for you and none of this would be possible without our shared love of romance.

I pray that someday I will get to meet each of you and thank you in person, but in the meantime, all I can do is tell you how amazing you are.

As I prepare my next love story for you, keep believing in your dreams and know that mine would not be possible without you.

With Love,



About Starfall Publications

Starfall Publications has helped me and so many others extend my passion from writing to you.

The prime focus of this company has been – and always will be – *quality* and I am honored to be able to publish my books under their name.

Having said that, I would like to officially thank Starfall Publications for offering me the opportunity to be part of such a wonderful, hard-working team!

Thanks to them, my dreams – and your dreams — have come true!

About Abby Ayles

Abby Ayles was born in the northern city of Manchester, England, but currently lives in Charleston, South Carolina, with her husband and their three cats. She holds a Master's degree in History and Arts and worked as a history teacher in middle school.

Her greatest interest lies in the era of Regency and Victorian England and Abby shares her love and knowledge of these periods with many readers in her newsletter.

In addition to this she has also written her first romantic novel, *The Duke's Secrets*, which is set in the era and is available for free on her website. As one reader commented "*Abby's writing makes you travel back in time!*"

When she has time to herself, Abby enjoys going to the theatre, reading and watching documentaries about Regency and Victorian England.

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